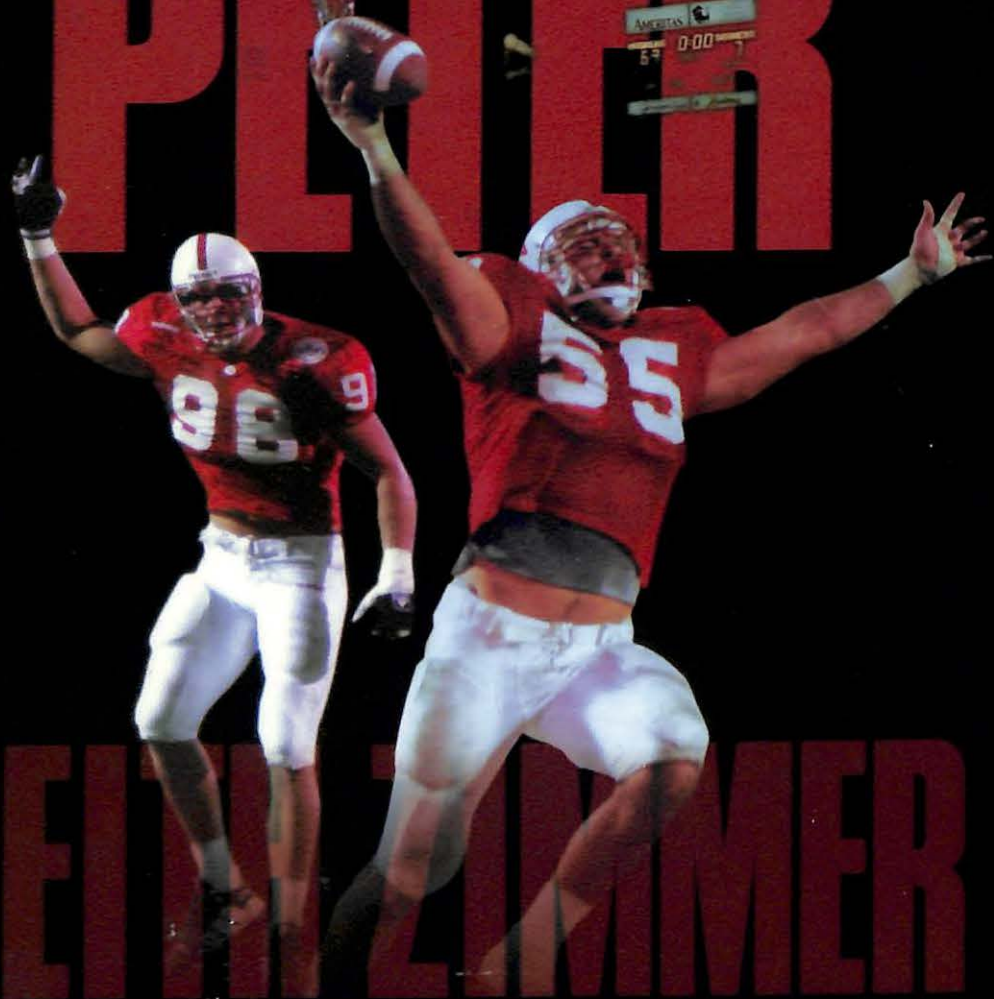


WISTROM

heart & soul



KEITH ZIMMER



Keith A. Zimmer, a member of the University of Nebraska Athletic Department since 1988, graduated from Wayne High School in Wayne, Nebraska. Later, he attended and graduated from Wayne State College with honors. He earned his undergraduate degree in Human Services Counseling. Keith also has a Master's degree in Athletic Counseling from Springfield College in Massachusetts.

At Nebraska, Zimmer coordinates the nationally recognized "*School is Cool*" Jam—a motivational pep rally impacting 17,000 Nebraska students on an annual basis. A portion of the proceeds from this book will benefit the "*School is Cool*" Jam.

(Continued on back flap)

WISTROM
heart & soul
PETER

KEITH ZIMMER

PHOTOS BY GORDON THIESSEN

WISTROM & PETER: HEART & SOUL

Keith Zimmer, Wistrom & Peter: Heart & Soul

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Coach Charlie McBride has always told us that we should play the game for the ones we love. The people for whom we have laid it on the line with 110 percent effort are our teammates, coaches, families, and fans.

For starters, we would like to dedicate this book to our Nebraska teammates. There is much more to Nebraska football than the games played. It is about making long-lasting friendships. Our teammates have become our brothers who are nothing short of family. During the last four to five years, we have spent more time with our teammates than our own families. The chance to blend with guys of all backgrounds from all parts of the United States has better prepared us for our days beyond Nebraska and life after football. We have shared dreams, disappointment, celebration, frustration, unity, sweat, and tears while representing the best college football team in the country. As we share our Nebraska memories, we would like to thank all of our teammates and wish them the best as they pursue their individual dreams and goals.

Neither of us would have become the players or men we are without the support, guidance, and encouragement from the coaching staff. Position coaches Charlie McBride, Nelson Barnes, and Tony Samuel deserve a special thank you! The primary reason we both came to Nebraska was none other than Coach Osborne. Coach, you have truly been a father figure to both of us and every team you have coached. We sincerely thank you for the philosophy of life you stressed day in and day out placing emphasis on the development of the total person. We respect your loyalty and commitment to young people. We were pleased to represent your previous 24 Nebraska football teams and share in your historic 250th career victory in 25 years of excellence. While we were initially shocked by the news of your retirement as head coach, we are both thrilled to have had the chance to play under

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your guidance and leadership. We are pleased you were able to leave the game on your terms and on top of your profession. Your impact on Nebraska football can never be measured and your presence will never be lost.

Of course both of us are forever in debt to the love and support we have received from our families. Our parents, Hubert and Mary Peter and Ron and Kathy Wistrom, our siblings, and our extended families have been there every step of the way to cheer us on and provide support during the challenging times. You have raised us well and we have worked hard to represent our respective families as best as we know how.

Finally, we would like to dedicate this book to the best college football fans in the country. We now understand what it means when people say—"There is no place like Nebraska!" Your support in Memorial Stadium, and especially on the road, motivates players to give their all on every down. You have adopted us and made us feel like family. We will always have great memories of the Nebraska campus, Lincoln, and the entire state. Keep up the great work and keep packing Memorial Stadium. Without your support and enthusiasm, the players would come up short.

Now it's time to get your game faces on as we share our thoughts and memories about life as Nebraska Cornhuskers! Thank you and enjoy the book.

Go Huskers!

Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Iwould like to thank Tom Swanson of Nebraska Book Publishing for his confidence and cooperation. I am indebted to Marty Hyde and Gordon Thiessen for their input and assistance in editing. Also, special recognition goes to all members of the 1997 Nebraska Football team, especially the 23 seniors who enjoyed a remarkable Husker career. Obviously, I enjoyed having the opportunity to visit with two of the all-time great personalities of the college football world in Grant and Jason. I appreciate the way both of these fine young men willingly shared heartfelt emotions in detailing the 1997 season and much more.

I would like to acknowledge Coach Tom Osborne and congratulate him for an outstanding 25 years of leadership and character development for the entire Nebraska Football program. I credit Coach Osborne for teaching me how to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with college student-athletes. Professionally, I would also like to thank Bill Byrne, Al Papik and Frank Solich for their support of this project. Personally, I wish to thank my beautiful wife, Michelle, for her patience, advice, support and love.

Keith Zimmer

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I remember talking to Grant Wistrom after he and the Nebraska Cornhuskers had just defeated a pretty average Virginia Tech team. He was torn—return for his senior season and risk injury, or declare himself eligible for the NFL draft. I remember telling Grant that the most fun he would ever have in his life was going to be at Nebraska. The NFL was a business and people at that level really didn't care about their athletes.

I remember hanging up and saying to myself, "There is no way that Grant will be able to withstand the temptation. He's going to the NFL." You know loyalty is something that many people talk about but few actually carry out. *Wistrom & Peter, Heart & Soul* chronicles that loyalty which both Grant and Jason felt with regard to the University of Nebraska. I was impressed that in today's society of "What's in it for me?," here are two young men who remained loyal to their university that had made a commitment to them.

I remember the producer at CNNSI asking me to do a feature story on Grant and Jason. He said, "It will be two great meat heads. They should give you some great quotes." I quickly pointed out that Grant was a two-time Academic All-American and Jason was on schedule to graduate in 4½ years. *Wistrom & Peter, Heart & Soul* effectively shows that, even though these stars had all the pressure that comes with being captains and effective leaders of a team that was desperately trying to win its third national championship, they never forgot that they came to Nebraska as a student-athlete and both fulfilled the role of student first.

I remember reading that Grant had decided to return for his senior season. I knew he had made the right decision. I just hoped that he would stay healthy and have a great year. I also suddenly remembered that Grant had a real legitimate chance at breaking my all-time sack record! *Wistrom & Peter, Heart & Soul* accurately

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portrays Grant and Jason as two players who never ever worried about personal goals or accolades, but rather two stars who simply wanted to win for the team and bring home another championship. I watched in person as Nebraska and the Blackshirts totally dominated a Tennessee team. Guess who dominated? Grant's mere presence made the right side of Nebraska defense off-limits; and Jason Peter was as dominating as any defensive lineman could be in a huge game. The emotion that I witnessed that night is so neatly portrayed in this book.

I remember interviewing Jason and Grant on the field after the game and really being able to identify with the emotion and joy that comes with being a part of the Big Red. I was Grant's recruiting host and to see him progress into the Lombardi Award winner as well as an Academic All-American was rewarding. And Jason "Christian's little brother" Peter, a guy who many people questioned, simply went out and developed himself into the most dominating defensive tackle in college football in 1997.

Finally, I also remember the emotion that I felt as a player for Tom Osborne. I couldn't imagine what it must have been like to be a part of Coach's final season. Unless you have had the opportunity to play for Coach, you will never understand how his players feel about him. Grant and Jason were no different. It's clearly touching how they describe the man that really is *On Solid Ground*.

Wistrom & Peter, Heart & Soul is authored by Keith Zimmer who does a wonderful job of telling the story of two all-time greats in the Cornhusker family. You will enjoy this book as it accurately describes what it's like from the perspective of two of the best ever! Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Trev Alberts". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "A".

Trev Alberts

Former Husker All-American Linebacker

On December 31, 1996, the defending back-to-back National Champion Nebraska Cornhusker football team gathered in a familiar place, a locker room, before the annual Orange Bowl showdown. Although the plush surroundings at Pro Player Park were a welcome change for fans and players, there was much missing from the tradition-rich classic. The Husker players and faithful fans had recently grown fond of the venerable Orange Bowl Stadium, the site of two previous bowl games including Nebraska's come-from-behind thrilling national championship victory in the 1995 Orange Bowl against the Miami Hurricanes crowning the Big Red as the 1994 National Champions. The other was one year prior. Coach Tom Osborne's Huskers were seconds away from claiming the 1993 National Championship; however, they lost the 1994 Orange Bowl to Florida State in the game's closing seconds.

Indeed, much was missing from the 1996 Orange Bowl which matched the Huskers against 10th-ranked Virginia Tech. Nebraska's three previous bowl games were national championship games played in front of capacity crowds. This game would have no title implications, was far from sold out, and was a prelude to the perceived bigger and better bowl games.

Two Husker junior standouts, who all season long had been preparing themselves to be the 1997 team leaders, felt the 63rd Orange Bowl Classic would be a defining moment for the '97 Husker football squad. Defensive tackle Jason Peter and All-American rush end Grant Wistrom unofficially took over the reigns shortly before kickoff on New Year's Eve 1996. "Both Grant and I told the guys that certainly this wasn't the atmosphere we were accustomed to; however, tonight's game is the first step in preparing for next year," recalled Peter.

Added Wistrom, "Tom Osborne and Nebraska football worked so hard over the past few years to become known as the best football team in the country. We were feared and respected by

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everyone. After the early Arizona State loss and then stumbling late against Texas, many people were prepared to say Nebraska no longer belonged in the upper echelon of college football."

Continued Wistrom, "I told the guys that this is where we show the nation that Nebraska is not going to lay down after the Texas loss and take a step backward. We needed to prove to ourselves and others that we could right a wrong and get back to national prominence in 1997"

Nebraska would go on to win their 17th bowl game, third in a row. After the game and before the team departed Miami for Lincoln, there was a sense that a return to Miami was on the horizon. "A commitment was made by the returning players to do everything within our power to position ourselves to be back in Miami the following year," recalled Wistrom.

Added Peter, "It was an eerie feeling because it reminded me of the locker room aftermath following the narrow Orange Bowl loss to Florida State [in 1993]. My brother [Christian Peter], Aaron Graham, Rob Zatechka, Brenden Stai and others huddled around, some in tears, saying that this loss was a terrible feeling and from that moment on, the team would dedicate themselves to the goal of a national championship."

Perhaps the fallout of the 1996 season was a blessing in disguise. "Some guys thought they would just show up and go through the motions, and in January [at the Sugar Bowl], win another national championship," reflected Peter. "The burning desire and 110 percent everyday dedication appeared to be missing. Grant and I wanted to help lead the team back to No. 1. We are proud to chronicle the development of the 1997 National Championship Cornhusker football team as we saw it unfold," said Peter.

Wake-up Call in 1996

Nobody could blame the Huskers for feeling confident in 1996. In the previous two years, the Huskers were 25-0 and claimed back-to-back national championships in 1994 and 1995. Nebraska opened up the 1996 campaign with a 55-14 victory over Michigan State. Then, the Huskers had an extra week to prepare for the Arizona State game in Tempe.

The Sun Devils were looking for payback after Nebraska throttled Arizona State the previous year in Lincoln by a 49-point margin. The Huskers couldn't overcome turnovers and mistakes, and a talented Sun Devil football team produced a shutout on the same field on which the Huskers claimed the 1995 national title some nine months prior. Explained Wistrom, "We lost to a very good Arizona State football team on the road. Things like that happen every now and then. I was confident that our team would answer this early-season wake-up call and still stand tall playing for all the marbles by season's end."

Indeed, the Huskers would regain their national championship form and, after dropping to eighth in the polls, still would find themselves in the familiar position of possibly playing in the national championship game. The Huskers went on to outscore their next nine opponents 430-83; and after the season's final victory at home over fifth-ranked Colorado, Nebraska was one step away from earning a berth in the Sugar Bowl, with the possibility of playing the Florida State Seminoles.

Although Husker fans had long since made reservations for Bourbon Street in New Orleans, the players had one remaining game before securing a spot in their fourth consecutive national championship game and a final run at an unprecedented third straight national championship. Nebraska and Texas met in early December in the inaugural Big 12 Championship game played at the Trans World Dome in St. Louis. Even though Nebraska was heavily favored and enjoyed a home-field atmosphere, the Longhorns pulled all the right strings, putting an abrupt halt to any hopes of a "three-peat" for Nebraska. Texas won 37-27 and Nebraska was off to the FedEx Orange Bowl against Virginia Tech.

"After the Texas loss, the team and I were in a state of disbelief," remembered Wistrom, who just a few weeks earlier had been rumored a sure-shot first-round National Football League pick at the conclusion of his junior year. "Nobody ever dreamed that Texas was going to hang 37 on us. I would have laughed in somebody's face if they told me our defense would break that bad. The defense seemed to carry the team throughout the year; and then, it was the offense who did their part against Texas and we really let the team and the fans down."

Teammate and emotional leader Jason Peter was in full agreement with Wistrom. "The Blackshirts felt mostly responsible for the loss. We got caught napping and emotionally weren't ready to play. We came off such a high with the win against Colorado. In looking back, there was really nowhere for us to go but down. It was almost like we were being set up for a loss," recalled Peter.

Sure enough, the Texas loss put a damper on everyone's postseason holiday plans. Nobody was more dejected and disappointed than the Husker football team, especially the Blackshirts who would use the loss as motivation to get ready for the Orange Bowl and the 1997 season.

Attitude in Miami?

Still reeling from the Big 12 Championship game loss to Texas, coaches, players, media, and fans alike were curious which Nebraska team would show up in Miami for the Orange Bowl game versus a very good Virginia Tech team. What would the attitude be of the Husker football team? Would the Huskers cash in the season knowing that for the first time in four years they were not playing for a shot at No. 1? Would the Huskers use the Orange Bowl as a calling card to the nation, making a statement that the Texas loss was a fluke and the Huskers would be a force to be reckoned with in 1997?

This is Wistrom's take on the attitude of his Husker teammates. "Our frame of mind was that we were going to Miami to have fun off the field and be all business on the field. It was kind of refreshing, for a change, not to be stressing over everything and be so concerned with every move you make. It was kind of like playing football in the backyard again," described Wistrom. The Orange Bowl would prove to be very different from previous bowl games. "For the first time in years, we weren't under intense scrutiny and pressure. We actually felt like college football was a game and not strictly business," summarized Wistrom.

Wistrom's sidekick and roommate was skeptical about how his teammates would handle the environment and less intense bowl atmosphere. "I honestly thought there might be some guys that would feel we weren't playing for anything and, consequently, the

trip would be one big party," feared Peter. "In retrospect, the guys were able to go out and practice loosely and just have fun the way the game was intended to be. Even though practice was still intense, we got back to playing and enjoying football in a pressure-free environment." Peter and Wistrom, without question, were representative of the attitude in Miami.

The two Nebraska defensive stars had a reputation for giving it their all on every play of every practice, yet they were also known for their individuality. Unfortunately for the parents of Peter and Wistrom, the twosome chose to express their individuality with the help of a body-piercing specialist in Miami. Whereas most Huskers are happy to bring home the traditional T-shirt souvenir, the two amigos would have more permanent reminders of their visit. Peter had his tongue pierced while Wistrom chose to pierce his right eyebrow. "At the time, it seemed like the right thing to do, but ultimately, I wish I would have gotten a T-shirt," remarked Wistrom. Although some question the judgment of Peter and Wistrom with the body-piercing experience, perhaps they were making a statement of some kind to their teammates. Much to their credit, Peter and Wistrom were able to conceal their new metal until after the Orange Bowl game.

The players were glad for game day December 31, 1996, to finally arrive. According to Peter, the game was a chance for redemption and an opportunity to prove a point. "We were playing for the respect of the public. After the Texas loss, people around the country didn't think Nebraska was a power anymore. We didn't want to be known as the team that let everything go down the drain. We wanted to be the team that leaves no doubt and goes out on top," remarked Peter.

Peter and Wistrom, along with the 1996 team captains, were able to fire up the team on game day only to be greeted by a half-empty Pro Player Stadium Orange Bowl crowd. Recalled Peter, "It was somewhat upsetting to see that when we weren't playing for No. 1, the loyalty dropped off. Don't get me wrong, we have the best fans in the country and I understand they spent their money in

St. Louis at the Big 12 Championship, but it was definitely discouraging and different from what we were accustomed to."

According to Wistrom, the feeling was much the same. "I don't remember ever playing, even on the road, in less than a full stadium. I'm mature enough to realize that an empty stadium doesn't mean people care any less about you. I understand there was a cost factor and people will take extra measures to get to a national title game," said Wistrom.

Continued Peter, "Once you're on the field, you aren't worried how many people are in the stands. You are out there playing and focused on the task at hand. The crowd is usually good for the first series or two, and beyond that, it's difficult for them to make a significant impact for 60 minutes."

Wistrom likewise was able to overcome the lack of a sellout crowd. "The main people I play for are my teammates and my family. Those are the difference-makers and it's all worthwhile when they are in attendance."

Peter, Wistrom, and company proved to be true gamers overcoming a pro-Virginia Tech crowd and fired-up Hokie football team hoping to earn the national respect the Huskers didn't want to lose. Coach Tom Osborne's Huskers would have much to celebrate on New Year's Eve 1996 in Miami. The Husker offense once again fared especially well being sparked by the play of Scott Frost and eventual Orange Bowl Most Valuable Player, Damon Benning. The Blackshirts rebounded nicely holding a potent Jim Druckenmiller-led offense to just 21 points. Mike Minter led the defense with 11 tackles, while Jamel Williams and Octavious McFarlin each recorded nine stops. Perhaps the play of the night was the touchdown run by none other than Jason Peter. In addition to two tackles and a sack, Peter scooped up a fumble and raced 31 yards for a Husker score. This would be the second consecutive bowl game that a streaking No. 55 was caught sprinting down the field in search of the end zone. Jason's would count, whereas older brother and now New York Giant, Christian Peter, had his dash for fame nullified after picking up a muffed two-point conversion attempt by the Florida Gators in the '95 Fiesta Bowl.

Not surprisingly, the younger Peter remembers vivid details of his Orange Bowl touchdown run. "Virginia Tech had a third down, and Mike Rucker and I were in on an end stunt. Rucker came through and knocked the ball out of Druckenmiller's hands and I saw the ball lying on the ground. The first thing I thought was, 'Hey, I just have to pick it up clean and then I'm off to the races.' I was able to scoop up the ball and then didn't look back. As I'm running it in, I'm having flashbacks to Christian at the Fiesta Bowl. I was thinking of all the high stepping he did and remembered at that time during the game we were up by 40-some points. On this play, it was still early and close, so I knew I couldn't mess around. I also thought of Leon Lett of the Dallas Cowboys who, during a Super Bowl, was showboating while Don Beebe of the Buffalo Bills chased him down and knocked the ball loose preventing a score. I really feel like that return was the turning point of the game as previously Virginia Tech was moving the ball and that play swayed the momentum," concluded Peter.

Nebraska would go on to claim a 41-21 victory over Virginia Tech, ending the season on a high note. The Huskers finished the season ranked No. 6 and left the stadium that night with the understanding that a return visit in 1997-98 would be imminent.

Loyalty Redefined

Steadfast allegiance to one's homeland or being faithful to a person, ideal or custom are the conventional definitions of loyalty. During their stellar Husker careers, both Peter and Wistrom would help redefine the term loyalty.

Peter's opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty would come before Wistrom's. After wearing jersey No. 95 for the first two years of his Husker career, Peter requested the switch to No. 55 before the start of the 1996 season, his junior year. Jersey No. 55 was previously worn by Husker co-captain and older brother, Christian Peter. Christian had been maligned by the national media for a series of off-field issues and many, including Jason, believed Christian was unjustly labeled as the "bad boy" of college football.

"Basically, the jersey switch came down to some of the well-documented off-the-field allegations and situations regarding Christian. I believe Christian got the short end of the stick on the whole deal by having to go to jail for 10 days." Continued Peter, "The icing on the cake and final straw was when the New England Patriots drafted Christian and then cut him within a few days, claiming the organization had no knowledge of Christian's past problems. I wanted to make a long-lasting statement to Christian that just because others have sold out on him, by no means have the Nebraska program or I cut him off and labeled him as a failure or disappointment."

Not only was Peter paying tribute to Christian for the

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contributions he made to the Husker football team, he was also gesturing a personal thank you by sporting No. 55. "It was a way for me to say thanks to Christian for all he did to help me both on and off the field," recalled Peter. Unlike most freshmen, the younger Peter had an immediate advantage by having Christian already on campus and in the program. "I was instantly accepted and had a support network from day one because of Christian and his friends. Christian and I have many similarities and usually anyone he gets along with becomes a good friend of mine. Guys like Terry Connealy and Kevin Raemaekers were very helpful in my development as a person and player," remembered Peter.

Although he started in all 12 games alongside Christian in 1995 as a redshirt sophomore, Peter was still a relative unknown playing in the shadows of his brother and the likes of Tommie Frazier, Ahman Green, and Lawrence Phillips. Thus, going into his junior year, Peter was determined to make his name and No. 95 well known during the 1996 season. "In April of '96, Christian jokingly said I should wear his No. 55 and I told him to forget it as I was trying to make a name for myself and emerge out of his shadow. Then, after the Kearney incident and the draft ordeal with the Patriots, I thought it was the least I could do. I kind of felt that act of loyalty could go a long way in swaying the fortunes of Christian," said Jason. Only time will tell.

In addition, only time would tell for thousands of nervous Nebraska fans regarding the eventual decision of all-everything rush end Grant Wistrom. Midway through his junior season, speculation about Wistrom bypassing his senior year in favor of the National Football League was at an all-time high. Credit draft analyst Mel Kiper Jr. for stirring up the draft issue. Remembers Wistrom, "Kiper conducted a mock NFL draft on the Internet in November before the Colorado game and he had me at No. 4 overall. Some of the area media saw those projections, and all of a sudden, people had me all but leaving Nebraska at the conclusion of the season."

In Wistrom's estimation, the draft talk was all blown out of proportion. "I honestly don't think the NFL was as high on me as

everyone thought they were. Obviously agents are going to embellish your draft status and blow a little smoke. I heard it all from top 10 to top 5 to possibly the top pick," explained Wistrom.

Wistrom, a GTE Academic All-American, wasn't about to make a hasty decision regarding his future. "Throughout all of the hype and speculation, I was intent on staying at Nebraska. Still, I felt I had to do some homework and make an intelligent decision. If through my research I truly felt I would be a legitimate top 5 or top 10 pick, it would have been in my best interest to go to the pros."

Wistrom's decision-making process was aided by valuable input from Coach Osborne. "I sat down with Coach Osborne several times and not once did he try to influence my decision one way or another. Coach made some calls and spoke with some people in the NFL. The feedback was that I would be a late first-round to early second-round pick. I honestly felt I would improve with one more year becoming bigger, stronger, and faster. Ultimately, I would be even more of a commodity with another year at Nebraska," concluded Wistrom.

Some additional reasons contributed to Wistrom's strong sense of loyalty to the Husker program. "Our team fell short of achieving the goals of being Big 12 and national champions in 1996. I want to leave Nebraska a champion and go out on top," he explained. Yet another reason Wistrom will be wearing the scarlet and cream for the Huskers in 1997 is his goal to be a team captain. "I thrive on being the guy that people look to, both on and off the field," said the Webb City, Missouri, native. "I will work extremely hard at all times to prove to myself and teammates that I'm worthy of being a Husker captain."

Wistrom's final and most meaningful reason for remaining a Husker centered around the respect he had developed for Coach Tom Osborne. "I have the utmost respect for Tom Osborne and his program. Coach and the entire Nebraska staff have done so much to help me as a player, student, and person. It was important for me to honor my commitment to the Nebraska program, especially Coach Osborne," said Wistrom. Odds are that Grant Wistrom's decision

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will pay big dividends for himself and the Nebraska program. Wistrom's NFL stock will certainly rise with another year of college experience and chances appear strong that he will realize his goals of becoming a team captain and going out as a champion.

Leadership by Example

Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom share the same philosophy about leadership. "We both bust our butt every day, do all the extra things, and our motors are always going 110 percent," explained Wistrom. Although still juniors at the time, Peter and Wistrom slowly but surely started to emerge as the team leaders throughout preparations for the 1996 Orange Bowl. "Basically, Grant and I have no problem taking control of the team, but we both realize others are going to have to emerge in order for us to be a great football team," said Peter.

Upon arriving back in Lincoln during mid-January 1997, Peter and Wistrom were both quick to lead by example taking the steps necessary to put the Huskers back on top of the college football world. Prior to the start of spring football in late March, Peter and Wistrom were fixtures in the Husker Power Strength Complex. "Neither of us would even think about missing a workout as we always wanted to keep our physical and mental edge," recalled Peter.

In fact, according to Peter, he drew inspiration from the likes of his brother, Christian, and former teammate Aaron Graham, now of the Arizona Cardinals. Both Christian and Graham were team captains on the 1995 National Championship Husker football team. "Christian had great leadership qualities. He gave everyone on the team a tremendous amount of confidence. When we took the field, there was no doubt that we would win the game," recalled Peter.

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Indeed, little doubt was left throughout the 1995 season as the Huskers went 12-0 with the closest contest being a 35-21 win against Washington State. "To this day, the thing players remember the most about Christian was his pregame locker room talks. They were absolutely legendary," said the younger Peter. "It was absolutely incredible the way Christian could take over a team in the locker room. After his talks, there was total focus in every player's eyes. I hope I have the opportunity to bring that type of inspiration and determination to the 1997 team."

Whereas Jason valued Christian's intensity before and during the games, Aaron Graham gained instant respect for his approach during every play of every practice and every game. "Some of the guys made fun of Graham and the way he would hustle from one station to another during practice. He was constantly challenging and encouraging the other players," remembered Peter.

Both Peter and Wistrom model Graham's leadership. "I really think intensity is the key," said Wistrom. "Hopefully the other players can't help but take notice of the fact that we leave everything on the field during every practice and every game," he remarked.

Wistrom is optimistic that other players won't be able to avoid taking notice of his leadership qualities. "It is very much a goal of mine to be a team captain. I think captains have an opportunity to truly leave a mark on the program." Continued Wistrom, "I want to give everybody else a part of what's inside of me."

Likewise, Peter hopes to follow his brother's footsteps and earn the honor of being named team captain. "I would consider being elected a captain one of the highest honors of my career. To have the respect of 150 players and be one of four team leaders is pretty powerful. To me, it means others respect you as a player, as a complete person and above all, as someone they want representing the team," summarized Peter.

Peter and Wistrom's first real opportunity as emerging and eventual team leaders would come with the start of spring football practice on March 31, 1997.

The Off-Season: Spring Ball and Summer Conditioning

Typically, returning starters like Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom look at spring football practice as the necessary evil of college football. This spring practice would be different, hoped Peter and Wistrom, as many questions needed to be answered. The top question—who would fill the eight starting positions up for grabs on the defense?

According to Peter, spring ball is very important to the future success of the team. "The spring is the time when chemistry is developed for the upcoming season. You have to find 22 guys that are capable of producing every Saturday," commented Peter. In fact, returning starters like Peter and Wistrom feel they have to reestablish themselves as starters, not taking starter-status for granted. Said Peter, "There are no guarantees. I still have to give it my all every day in practice in order to keep my starting job."

Wistrom especially felt the need to have a good spring practice with the arrival of new rush end coach Nelson Barnes, formerly of the University of Texas. "I honestly didn't see myself losing my position, but did feel a need to produce and impress." Continued Wistrom, "I think the coaching change and my goal of being a team captain instilled more fire and hunger in me than ever before. I wanted to leave no doubt to my coaches and teammates that I wasn't resting on my laurels."

Peter and Wistrom left no doubt during spring ball 1997 and both were impressed by the development of the Blackshirts. "As a

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perceived team leader, I was always trying to fuel competition among the guys and crank up the intensity," said Peter. Apparently, Peter was successful as many players recall spring ball 1997 as one of the most intense in recent memory.

Explained Wistrom, "We had some guys that were really bringing the wood and hammering guys which is what you really look for on defense." Both Peter and Wistrom mentioned the development of Brian Shaw, Ben Battenback, Steve Warren, and Mike Brown as some of many who took their game to new heights. "The defense really developed and I'm confident there won't be a drop off this upcoming season," said Wistrom.

Added Peter, "It's just a matter of learning the plays and studying the defense."

Finally, after 14 days of intense and grueling practice, April 26, the day of the annual Red-White game, arrived. "In a way, it's really kind of crazy when you think about it. You beat on your own teammates for a couple of weeks with the big reward being a scrimmage against your own team for the umpteenth time," said Wistrom. "The game itself, however, is very competitive and sets the tone for the attitude the team will take into two-a-days. It's also nice to have the fans back in the stadium and give them a sneak preview of things to come."

Even though the game produced some interesting developments, such as outstanding performances by the likes of running back Dan Alexander and linebacker Ben Battenback, many remember the nervous moments when returning All-American Wistrom was injured early in the first quarter. Wistrom suffered a broken pinky finger on his left hand. "I think the fans and my parents were more alarmed than I was. When I play the game, I don't think about getting hurt. If you are thinking of getting hurt, then you aren't playing full speed," added Wistrom. "When you're on the field, there is only one thing on your mind and that is the play on the field."

Peter, Wistrom's roommate, was quick to console his injured fellow Blackshirt. "My first concern was if Grant would still be able to do the cooking and cleaning with his injured finger," joked Peter.

All jokes aside, Peter was all too familiar with the impact injuries can have on a football career. Jason's younger brother, Damian, was once a highly-touted scholarship student-athlete at Notre Dame before suffering a tragic spinal injury during a swimming pool accident. Damian, whom both Jason and Christian regard as the best athlete of the three, returned to South Bend and the Notre Dame campus still hoping to contribute to the Fighting Irish in some form. "After his accident, he was pretty much discarded by Notre Dame, so he started to look at other options and during the spring '97 term, I'm glad to say, he enrolled part-time at Nebraska," said Jason.

Damian had been progressing well from his injury, and in fact, speculation was that he might, against all odds, see the football field again. Coach Osborne was very open to the idea of Damian playing only if medical clearance could be provided. Damian was flown to specialists all over the country to see if it was realistic and safe for him to resume his promising football career. Unfortunately for Peter and for Nebraska, specialists determined the younger Peter would never see the field again, at least as a player.

"I was disappointed that Damian wouldn't be able to play football again, but just felt fortunate to have him on campus at Nebraska." Added Peter, "I was also happy that Coach Osborne gave Damian the opportunity to be an undergraduate assistant for the team. More than anything, Damian just needed to be part of a team. He had been involved in athletics his whole life and suddenly had sports taken away. Damian once again feels valued and like he is contributing to the success of the team," concluded Peter.

Summer conditioning, just like spring practice, would prove to go a long way in determining the development and eventual success of the '97 Husker football team. "I really think the tone for the upcoming season was established during a players-only meeting during spring football," said Wistrom. "Guys like Jason, Vershan Jackson, Ahman Green and I, among others, got up and told the team that we didn't realize our potential in 1996. Our message was that we wouldn't tolerate a lack of commitment and needed unity and a tireless work ethic throughout the entire spring and summer leading up to the start of two-a-days," summarized Wistrom.

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Concerning summer workouts, the message was loud and clear. Even though summer workouts couldn't be mandatory, they were highly recommended and attendance would be taken daily. Those missing a workout would endure extra running. Team leaders like Peter and Wistrom were placing accountability into summer workouts realizing that a well-conditioned team often translates into three or four fourth-quarter victories during the regular season.

Peter, for one, noticed marked improvement over the summer of 1996. "I think we had one of the best summers ever. It's 125 degrees on the field and there are many other places most guys would like to be. Bottom line is—champions are made in the summer and we needed to work hard to put ourselves in a position to take back what we lost last season, the national title."

Concluded Peter, "Most of the guys are genuinely hungry for a conference and national championship and I'm very proud of the consistency and intensity they showed all summer long."

Life Outside of Football

Summer conditioning and workouts would prove to be only a small part of the demanding schedules adhered to by Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom. Fearless leaders on the field, the two have also made their mark in the classroom while consciously trying to maintain role model standards in the community.

By his own admission, Peter has never considered himself remotely close to a Rhodes scholar. Peter attended Middletown South in New Jersey his first three years of high school before completing his high school education at Connecticut's Milford Academy, a reputable prep school. "School has never been easy for me," recalled Peter. "When I first came to college, Nebraska football was my top priority and the majority of my other thoughts were about professional football. College graduation was the furthest thing from my mind, and in fact, I really questioned if I was capable of earning a college diploma."

Throughout his college career, Peter acquired the necessary academic survival skills and matured into a steady college student-athlete. Majoring in communications studies, Peter drew inspiration from former roommate and teammate, Jared Tomich, now with the New Orleans Saints. "I remember people labeling Jared as a Proposition 48 and viewing him as a football player who probably wouldn't graduate. Jared was on a mission to prove to himself and others that it is realistic to be a great player and a successful student. Jared simply outworked the competition on the field and did the

same in the classroom," recalled Peter. In fact, Tomich not only graduated, but did so in 4 ½ years picking up his prized diploma in December 1996 before the end of his college football career at Nebraska.

"Jared's graduation was definitely a turning point for me and fueled my fire to close the deal and get my degree," remembered Peter. Another defining moment for Peter came when Dennis Leblanc, assistant athletic director for student services, clearly outlined all remaining degree requirements for Peter during his junior year. "When it was all in black and white and I could see just how close I was to graduation, I started to be consumed by the thought of graduating from college. My other goal was to finish at mid-term so that in the spring I could concentrate on getting ready for the National Football League Combines and Draft," said Peter.

So, in addition to a grueling summer workout schedule, all Jason Peter did during his 1997 summer vacation was enroll in and successfully complete 10 credit hours of summer school, leaving him just eight credits shy of graduation. "I've put four hard years of work into my studies and came to the realization that I have to finish what I started. Why not get the degree now and not have 'unfinished business' hanging over my head for the next 10 years," commented Peter. "Whenever I hang up the cleats, I want to make a smooth transition into the business world and not be searching to find my way in life."

During the summer of 1997 and on the road to college graduation, Peter feared that possibly his academic progress had taken a step backward. "It was during the heat of two-a-days and everyone is tired, exhausted, and somewhat irritable," illustrates Peter. "Coach McBride got his really serious look and cited my name along with two or three other defensive lineman. McBride went on to say, 'I have a letter here in front of me . . .' At that point, a million different things are racing through my mind. I thought, 'Oh no, now what did I do? Or, what were people claiming I did? Or, did I fail a class?' Coach McBride begins to read the letter which was a copy of a note the athletic-academic staff sent to my parents

recognizing several guys for their efforts in the classroom. What a relief; and in all honesty, it was a big deal to me and made me feel special. I haven't received many academic awards in my life so it was nice to be singled out for my hard work off the field. Typically, I get Cs and an occasional B, so I really appreciated being applauded for doing well in school."

Peter's most memorable academic moment was certainly college graduation in December 1997. "I can already tell you that graduation is my most meaningful accomplishment at Nebraska. Sure, national championships, All-American awards and the like are very special, but most people expected that kind of success out of me as a football player; and few, including me, thought I would get my degree," said Peter.

Whereas Peter defied the odds in the classroom, Wistrom was always a highly regarded student-athlete. At Webb City High School in Missouri, Wistrom was a 4.0 student and president of his National Honor Society. Throughout the college recruitment process, Wistrom and family were intent on finding a university committed to academic excellence. "Finding a coach and school dedicated toward the development of the total person was very important in my decision-making process," recalled Wistrom.

Without a doubt, Wistrom has made the most of his Nebraska experience being a leader, not just on the field, but especially in the classroom and community. During his junior year of football and school, Wistrom truly left his mark on the Nebraska football program. Wistrom earned consensus football All-American honors and was named to the prestigious GTE Academic All-American team. He was named Nebraska's 50th first-team football Academic All-American. These oil paintings of Wistrom, both as a football player and scholar, solidify his place in Husker football history. "Being named first-team Academic All-American in 1996 was the most memorable honor of my career. It's nice to be recognized as a good student, player, and person," he summarized. Wistrom, a pharmacy student, played as a true freshman and never took a redshirt year. Consequently, Wistrom will most likely leave

Nebraska for the National Football League without degree in hand; however, he hopes to have completed all pharmacy school entrance requirements.

Wistrom has positioned himself well for a spot in pharmacy school, volunteering in various hospitals and completing an internship during the summer of 1997 in the midst of summer workouts. "It was important for me to get some practical experience, so I interned at the Nebraska Pharmacists Association and was able to apply my classroom experiences to the real world," explained Wistrom. Wistrom has also visited various hospitals throughout his four-year Nebraska tenure.

Community involvement has always been stressed by Tom Osborne and the Nebraska athletics department. Both Peter and Wistrom readily accepted the role-model challenge. "I always try to be careful about what I say and what I do. I fully realized the expectations to be a role model back in the recruitment process and I've tried to fulfill my obligation," stressed Wistrom.

Added Peter, "It's been rewarding to me to use my platform as a Nebraska football player to make a difference. I have a soft spot in my heart for kids and if something as simple as my autograph can put a glow in a kid's eye, then that's just fine with me."

Peter and Wistrom are just two of many student-athletes intent on breaking down the dumb jock stereotypes that still persist. "It's important for me to be known as much more than just a defensive tackle at Nebraska," said the emotional Peter. "I want to be remembered as someone who graduated in 4 ½ years and was always willing to lend a helping hand. Bringing a smile to someone's face makes me feel much better inside."

Community Caution

Upon joining the Nebraska football team, all players are cautioned by Coach Tom Osborne of the potential intense scrutiny they will endure as a member of a high-profile program. Right or wrong, student-athletes are often held to a higher standard, and upon stepping out-of-line, negative headlines are inevitable. "Coach Osborne gives the message several times a year to be careful and use good judgment when out in the community," said Wistrom.

Added Peter, "Coach stresses the importance of walking away from confrontations and that it takes a bigger man to avoid an altercation."

Perhaps Peter has learned the most about visible student-athletes who put themselves in threatening situations considering the issues and allegations made against his older brother and former Husker, Christian Peter. "Without a doubt, I've learned some very important lessons on how to conduct myself over the years," explained Peter. "When you become somewhat of a figure in the community, it seems as if people are always watching every move you make. Simply put, you can't mess up and if you do, it's suddenly everybody's business." When contemplating his actions and the decisions he's about to make, Peter often asks himself, "Am I going to be proud or am I going to embarrass myself and my family?"

According to Peter, "There are times that some of us feel like marked men with big Xs on our chests. Let's face it, it's really no secret who we are after being featured in programs, magazines,

television, and on posters. Sometimes as your status elevates and talk of a bright future continues, others are almost determined to bring you down."

Peter continued to describe the following scenario that has occurred more than he likes to admit throughout his Cornhusker career. "Some guys and I will go downtown to get something to eat or just be with some friends and it is inevitable that for no reason someone will come up to me and try to create a confrontation. Comments like, 'Hey tough guy, Colorado is going to kill you and kick your butt.' I'm thinking, why is he doing this; and of course I know he is just hoping that I will hit him, break his nose and then, when I make it in the National Football League, he'll cash in."

Peter realizes he has a lot more to lose than his cool. "You just have to realize that someone is always looking to make a name for themselves and looking for the easy road. I know I have to walk away or be prepared for the negative consequences," said Peter.

Just as Peter felt he was a marked man of sorts because of his football status and association with Christian, All-American rush end Wistrom certainly became a target with speculation of his lofty draft status late in his junior year. "At times, it's almost comical. I mean there have been several cases when guys who are 5-feet-6 inches and 140 pounds say, 'Hey, you stink and Washington is going to destroy you.' Obviously, they have their beer muscles on and are just hoping to catch you in a weak moment." Continued Wistrom, "Your first reaction is to pound them, but then you have to remember that a guy like me has everything to lose and nothing to gain by lowering myself to that level."

Avoiding confrontations with guys is not the only concern of players like Peter and Wistrom. "Sometimes it's the ladies, as well," said Wistrom. "It's kind of sad, but you have to be guarded and be careful who you date. You really have to be careful as many women have other motives with players. I don't even consider myself a person of fame or significant stature, but after enough harassment in the community, you can see why some of the really famous people keep to themselves and are reclusive."

In fact, Peter and Wistrom rarely place themselves in compromising situations. "Lots of times we'll just have some of the guys over at our house and spend an evening with those we trust," said Peter. "You lose a big part of your freedom when you become an impact player at Nebraska or any other major program."

Wistrom agreed, "It just comes with the territory, but fortunately there are 10 positive stories with the public for every negative one."

Heading into their senior seasons with the Husker program, Peter and Wistrom were well known statewide. Whether they were seen on the cover of the Spring Game program, the 1997 defensive poster, the cover of numerous preseason college football magazines, or featured in the 1997 Media Guide, the twosome were well recognized when they ventured out and about.

"We both realize that good community relations can help us as college players and eventually might help us as professional players," said Wistrom. "I remember when Trev Alberts told me that one of the reasons the Indianapolis Colts drafted him so high was his commitment to community service and being such a good public relations guy."

Consequently, when the kids come calling, Peter and Wistrom almost always oblige. "It doesn't bother me at all when I'm walking through the mall and some kid comes up to me and wants my autograph," said Peter.

Wistrom, as well, is genuinely appreciative of the reception he has received in the community of Lincoln and the state of Nebraska. "After I made my decision to stay at Nebraska and not declare myself eligible for the NFL Draft, countless people would thank me for staying and being loyal to the program. I also received tons of mail from kids and parents I've worked with thanking me for taking the time to share part of my life and insights with them."

Peter and Wistrom have done an admirable job of maintaining nurturing and positive community relationships. Equally important to their success and the perception of the entire team would be the relationships they developed with the media throughout their careers.

Media Mania and Preseason Hype

Husker student-athletes like Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom have many responsibilities, not the least of which is developing appropriate relationships with the media. As players start to establish themselves athletically, intense media scrutiny is quick to follow. No different than Husker Head Coach Tom Osborne preparing his team for on-the-field battle, efforts are taken to get the Huskers ready for the media mania surrounding Nebraska football.

The Nebraska Sports Information staff works continually with all student-athletes, especially high-profile players like Peter and Wistrom. Insights on how to respond to challenging questions and cautions on how to avoid creating controversy are provided to the Husker football team before the start of two-a-days and throughout the season. In fact, during the first team meeting of fall practice, tradition calls for the unveiling of the much-anticipated media blooper tape produced by HuskerVision's Jeff Schmahl. The tape highlights how not to interact with the media while sensationalized bloopers stress the importance of thinking through every question. Said Wistrom of the blooper tape, "It's fun to watch your teammates make idiots of themselves. Unfortunately, I was on the tape quite a bit myself."

Added Peter, "The blooper tape is all fun and games, but it certainly makes you think about future interactions with all media. The thing I enjoy about the tape is watching Coach Osborne's reaction. To see him laugh into tears is a side of the legend most people never get to see," explained Peter.

In addition to the guidance and coaching from the Nebraska staff, Peter had the opportunity to watch his older brother, Christian, interact with, and at times, totally captivate the media. "I saw the way Christian dealt with the media and he just had a special knack for getting the media to embrace him. The key with Christian was that he wasn't afraid to reveal some personality and that he was a real person, not a football player with typical scripted responses. Yes, Christian was cautious and always used good judgment, but he was able to get the area media to love him because he always shared from the heart," remarked Peter.

The younger Peter has followed his brother's footsteps, not just with his jersey number, but also with media relations. "Some guys try to avoid the media like the plague, but I genuinely look forward to it," said Peter. He listed several key principles when interacting with the media. "It's important to be relaxed, listen to each question, and be careful. At times, the media can be fickle and set you up. Just when you think you might have a safe relationship with a certain reporter, you run the risk of getting too comfortable and revealing too much. If your luck turns, the very media you thought was your best friend could destroy you and tear you down. Unfortunately, I saw that happen with Christian when he experienced his adversity."

Peter, Wistrom, and company have many responsibilities as big-time college student-athletes. At Nebraska, regular weekly press conferences are held every Tuesday at which the past game is reviewed and the upcoming contest is discussed. Postgame press conferences are also held. Additionally, players such as Peter and Wistrom are frequently requested for national television and newspaper interviews.

Said Wistrom, "I actually enjoy the Tuesday press conferences. It's a pretty relaxed environment and really starts to put me in the right frame of mind for the upcoming game." The postgame press meetings, according to Wistrom, are another story. "After the game, I just want to get my weekend started and see my family as soon as possible. It's been a tiring, demanding week and a tough game. It's pushing 5:00 p.m. on Saturday and you want to put football behind

you, at least for a day. I appreciate the support we get from our local beat writers, and as a result, I have always shown up when requested by media. I also try to make some time for the fans and sign autographs for the kids. All things considered, it is very important to me to see my family as soon as possible."

Wistrom, like Peter, is good with the media and was selected to be one of Nebraska's player representatives at the annual Big 12 Conference Media Day in Irving, Texas, prior to the start of the 1997 season. "Overall, it was a cool experience but certainly one where I had to be very focused on every comment I made. It's not like Tuesday press conferences with your own media in Lincoln. You have opposing states and schools looking for you to provide incentive or bulletin board material for other Big 12 Conference foes," said Wistrom. In fact, Wistrom explained how Texas reporters dwelled on Nebraska's Big 12 Championship loss to the Longhorns. "They wanted me to say that the only focus of our upcoming season was centered around revenge against Texas." After watching Coach Osborne master the media for three full years, Wistrom wasn't about to get drawn into any perceived controversy. "I was honest at all times but certainly very guarded and diplomatic."

Wistrom was quick to point out that players might feel one way, yet respond in the safe way. "It's a chess match of sorts dealing with the media. You just have to feel the situation out and use good judgment. It really shouldn't shock anyone that Nebraska wants to make it back to the Big 12 Championship game and to beat Texas would make everything that much better."

Peter, Wistrom, and teammates have handled themselves admirably with the Nebraska media. In fact, the very reason education and preparation are stressed prior to media encounters is evident in what would later happen at Colorado.

In early August '97, a Colorado defensive player was quoted as saying, "Colorado is going to kick the crap out of Nebraska this year." As could be predicted, that quote was highlighted and displayed throughout the Nebraska locker room. Players like Peter and Wistrom received numerous copies of the article from Nebraska

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fans who wanted to make sure the Huskers received inspiration from the ill-advised comments. "No question. We use those comments as motivation and it also tells me something about their team's insecurity," said Peter.

Echoed Wistrom, "If they are talking about Nebraska in August and we don't play them until the end of November, they are focusing on us way too early and probably won't be undefeated by the time we play them. The rule is one play, one game at a time."

Whereas some teams obviously point ahead to marquee matchups, individual decorated players can also become targets. One could argue that the positive media coverage on the likes of returning All-American Grant Wistrom made him a "poster boy" of sorts for opposing teams. Wistrom knows that opposing players use his personal accolades as a motivating tool prior to individual matchups. "I did the same thing last summer. I knew when we played Arizona State I would be going up against all-everything offensive lineman Juan Roeque. I plastered up a magazine picture of him in my place and thought of him every time I went into the weight room and conditioned. I was determined to prove to him and others that I was the better of the two players." Before spraining his neck in the first half, Wistrom dominated Roeque with seven tackles and two sacks. Unfortunately, an injury prevented Wistrom from playing the rest of the game.

In 1997, Wistrom was regarded as one of the top 10 magazine cover boys and he knows others have him as a marked man. "All the preseason hype places a huge bull's eye on your back. I'm a target for everyone to have their best game against and that really doesn't bother me. In fact, I thrive on it." Don't take Wistrom wrong. He enjoys and appreciates the positive press and attention. "Heck yes, it's cool to walk into a store and see your picture on the cover of several magazines. I would have never imagined as a kid that I would be autographing magazine covers and the like featuring me," he shared.

Although Wistrom doesn't keep copies of the magazines for himself, he buys them and sends them to Webb City to his parents.

Wistrom uses the vision of his cover shots as his own personal motivation. "Being on the cover doesn't win any games. I know the high expectations of me, so I'm determined to back up all the preseason hype and work even harder as I prepare for my final season."

As Wistrom's summer was drawing to an end before the start of two-a-days, the preseason accolades had already started to arrive. The first of many was being named to the 1997 Preseason Playboy All-American team along with the likes of Husker teammate Aaron Taylor and Tennessee quarterback Peyton Manning. "The preseason honors aren't worth the paper they're printed on. I hope the honors are there at the end of the year and that our team reached all goals."

Nonetheless, gatherings at such preseason award banquets like the Playboy function in Tempe, Arizona, was a nice experience. "There was some discussion about football, but basically just a bunch of college kids getting together for a fun weekend." Wistrom spent most of his time with Tennessee's Manning, Florida State's Daryl Bush and Andy Katzenmoyer of Ohio State. "I really don't see myself in that elite of a category to be grouped with such talent. Again," stressed Wistrom, "awards and functions like the Playboy weekend primarily serve as motivation to prove to myself and the nation that I am the real deal."

The Rigors of Two-A-Days

Mixed emotions typically surround the onset of two-a-day practices for Husker football. Recalled Wistrom, "There is a certain sense of anticipation when it comes to the start of two-a-days. It's kind of like when you are in junior high and school is out for the summer and then the night before the first day of classes. You are anxious to get back in the groove and see your buddies. With two-a-days, there is a feeling of togetherness and camaraderie that is critical in developing team unity," concluded Wistrom.

August 7, 1997, was the first day Nebraska football players were allowed to report for the start of camp. The evening of the 7th was the traditional first team meeting. Some view the meeting as the same "song and dance" as the previous year. But others, like veteran Peter who was attending his fifth opening meeting, have a much different perspective. "To me, that first team meeting during two-a-days is a very exciting time. It signified the start of my senior year at Nebraska and I want to cherish every part of my final season," explained Peter.

At the meeting, Coach Tom Osborne discusses the philosophy of the coaching staff and upcoming goals. Said Peter, "My first few years, I was probably like the younger players in not fully appreciating the value of Coach Osborne's wisdom. Gradually, I started to understand where Coach Osborne was coming from and that he carefully selects every word when addressing the team. Coach Osborne doesn't do anything just for the heck of it. To me, it's clear the guy has his Ph.D. in educational psychology."

Wistrom has a similar take on the opening team meeting. "The meetings are pretty boring and I could probably predict what the agenda will be year to year. On the other hand, I respect Coach Osborne for taking the time to address up-front important social and academic issues, choosing not to focus exclusively on football," stressed Wistrom. Wistrom and his family have always been impressed with Coach Osborne's commitment to developing the total person. "It was clear to me from the recruitment process forward that the man is concerned with us more as individuals than as players. I honestly believe he is happier with the maturity of a person than producing an All-American football player."

Added Wistrom, "For many players, this is the first time someone has really demonstrated a genuine interest in their lives outside of athletics. Most of the guys are constantly being told how great of football players they are, but rarely do the players get the message that they have a sense of worth as an individual. Coach Osborne sets the tone during the first meeting and his message is, 'You are here to graduate and not just be a football player.'" Osborne's messages are being heard loud and clear as his Huskers are consistently leading the Big 12 Conference in overall and black graduation rates.

Saturday, August 9, 1997, was Nebraska's first day of on-field practice for two-a-days. It should come as no surprise to anyone that Peter hit the ground running with the start of drills. "I wasn't dreading two-a-days like some players. You can't be moping around and be negative. You just have to suck it up and make the most of it," said Peter. This is easier said than done when considering the rigors of two-a-days. Recalled Peter, "On August 9, I woke up before my alarm went off at 5:15 a.m. It was kind of like not being able to sleep the night before a vacation. The rest of the mornings, believe me, 5:15 came too quick." According to Peter, not only did he have to get out of bed, he had to get his sidekick Wistrom up and going. "Here we are driving down to the stadium, not even saying a word to one another. I definitely didn't want to look at him that early in the morning," recalled Peter.

Peter and Wistrom were usually two of the first to arrive at West Stadium around 5:30 a.m. and would have something to eat at the training table. "It was important for us to get there early and be ready to go. As team leaders, we didn't want to be rushing in at the last minute," explained Peter. "After breakfast, now 6:00 a.m., it was time to get ankles taped and then get the gear on for practice. We would usually have about 10 to 15 minutes just to hang in the locker room and watch TV before having to be on the field at 7:00 a.m.," he described. "The morning practice would usually last approximately two hours and then for some of us, we were off to pump iron." Weightlifting is not required during two-a-days. Still, however, the likes of Wistrom, Peter, Chad Kelsay, Jon Zatechka, and some others would workout in Husker Power hoping to maintain or increase their performance edge. Said Peter, "The physical part is such a big aspect of the game for lineman that you never want to be in a catch-up mode. Psychologically, I also wanted to stay in my routine and know I wasn't leaving any stone unturned."

Outside of the core group of lifters, Peter and Wistrom hoped even more players would follow their lead and still hit the weights despite the fact lifting was not required. "Those are the guys we're going to war with and I want them at their best," said Wistrom. "It's idealistic to think everyone is going to put forth the extra effort and I guess you must write it off to immaturity. Hopefully, the younger players will realize, with time, the kind of intensity and effort it takes to be a champion."

After the optional lifting, players eat lunch and try to catch a nap before the start of 1:30 p.m. meetings. The afternoon practice runs from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. followed by treatment and a shower. Evening meetings are from 6:00 to 7:30 and then evening dinner is served. "The second practice is much tougher," recalled Peter. "It's usually much warmer and you're already tired from the first practice. Again, you just have to dig deep down and realize that this effort will pay dividends during the season and the fourth quarter."

Peter and Wistrom would usually make it home around 8:15 p.m., some 15 hours after their early morning departure. "My goal

was to always be in bed by 10:00 p.m. because 5:15 in the morning comes awfully quick," said Peter. Many people agree that athletics builds character, and without question, Peter is in full agreement that the strains of two-a-days makes you a better person. "You really have to be dedicated to get up at 5:15 in the morning 10 straight days to play a sport. I have established a very strong work ethic, good leadership qualities, and the ability to overcome adversity. I'm pretty sure that those same skills will be attractive to employers and will serve me well throughout my lifetime," commented Peter.

Not only does two-a-days make you a better individual, it allows you to grow closer as a team. "It's like a boot camp atmosphere where you are broken down so you can build team chemistry together. You learn of each person's struggles and come to look out for one another," said Wistrom.

After 10 grueling and challenging two-a-day practices, both Peter and Wistrom were favorably impressed. "Personally, I'm always hard on myself, feeling like I could have done better or played even harder," said Peter. With regards to the development of the team, Peter was quite pleased. "I was very happy with the younger players on defense. They all had a great attitude and never complained. Lots of guys stepped up and demonstrated we could be a very physical defense," commented Peter.

Added Wistrom, "The secondary and linebackers were a concern going into two-a-days and I think those guys really showed some ability and will get better with game experience. Personally," he said, "I was pleased that I maintained my weight and just wanted to work the rust off."

Both Peter and Wistrom singled out the play of middle linebacker Jay Foreman. "Jay was always making plays and showing lots of intensity and excitement. I predict Jay will have a great junior season and will emerge as a team captain for the 1998 season," said Peter.

Wistrom added, "Jay is really intense and he isn't afraid to take charge in the huddle. Jay commands your respect and full attention on the field at all times."

Concerning the offense, Wistrom believes injuries stymied their progress. "Most of the key running backs were missing so I think the offense struggled at times," remarked Wistrom.

Continued Peter, "The offense has some great players and I hope a couple of guys step up and really emerge as the offensive leaders to get the group focused and fired up."

Going into two-a-days, Peter and Wistrom had high expectations. "As I remember it, not one player missed a practice unrelated to injury and this was the most physical two-a-days I can recall," said Wistrom. "Nobody took two-a-days lightly, especially considering that we play at Washington in our third game of the season. We knew we had to make every practice count."

August 21—two-a-days were now over. The Huskers could direct their attention toward the start of the fall semester and the start of the 1997 college football season opener against Akron, now a little more than one week away.

Game Day — Just Around the Corner

The end of two-a-days signified that the college football season was just around the corner. The buildup to every Husker season is unavoidable. Television features, radio talk shows, magazines, special newspaper sections, Husker merchandise, commercials, television shows, and the like all point toward Saturday, August 30, when the heavily favored Huskers are scheduled to play Akron.

"To me, it would seem comparable to a family expecting a child. Nine months of preparation for a special event with lots of excitement, anguish, determination, and anticipation," described Wistrom. "This is my senior season and I've worked my whole life to be in a position to lead a team to a national championship," he added. "The summer conditioning, two-a-days, and weight training is all made worthwhile when opening day arrives. Walking through the tunnel and running onto the field with 76,000 screaming fans all dressed in red produces a rush that can't be put into words. Trust me, there is nothing like it on earth," explained the emotional Wistrom. "I've done lots of fun and exciting things in my lifetime. I'd give them all up just to have the opportunity to come back later in life and relive the tunnel walk on Husker game day."

Peter, like Wistrom, can't put game day into words. "There is nothing like the first game of every season. It makes all the hard work seem worthwhile. I mean, there are guys on the team that go through the year-round demands just to experience running on the field. Most realize they are a long shot to play. But to be part of the

Nebraska football family, and all of the tradition that goes with it, seems to be a driving force," said Peter. "The music, the big screens, the fans along the way, and of course, the Husker faithful . . . Well, it leaves me speechless and flat out gives me goose bumps. I can't wait for opening game day. I wish it was here tomorrow."

At times, recalled Peter and Wistrom, it is hard to imagine how Husker players can be average guys waiting in the car at a stoplight and the people in the car next to you have no idea or don't even care who you are. "You put a red and white jersey on us with the letter 'N' on our helmet and suddenly some of the guys are worshiped," explained Wistrom. "It can definitely be hard to keep everything in the proper perspective, and at times, you forget that we are amateur athletes playing a game and not professional athletes involved in a multimillion dollar business." All things considered, whether it be "unfinished business," "business as usual," or the reality that college football is indeed a "big-time business," student-athletes like Peter and Wistrom consider themselves fortunate to have the opportunity to compete and receive a college degree.

Before the curtain could be raised on the 1997 Huskers, a few housecleaning items remained. The weekend before opening day meant the annual Husker Photo Day and the selection of team captains.

Justice Served, Peter and Wistrom Elected Team Captains

Exactly one week before Tom Osborne's Huskers would begin their quest for a third national title in a four-year period, there was still some significant "unfinished business" to complete. Most Husker players associated Saturday, August 23, 1997, as either Photo Day for the fans or two days before the start of the fall semester. Some, like Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom, had this date marked on their calendars for months. August 23 was the day the team would select their captains who would hopefully lead them to the promised land, otherwise known as Miami, Florida.

One of the primary reasons Wistrom opted to return for his senior season was to achieve his goal of being elected a team captain. "Leading up to that day, I had a pretty good feeling that justice would be served and I would be elected a captain. You can't really be sure considering some guys will probably vote for their friends and not necessarily the most deserving. The bottom line was, I was at peace with myself knowing I had done everything within my control," reflected Wistrom.

Likewise, Peter remembered having some nervous moments that day. "I knew inside that being elected captain was something I deserved. I honestly felt [that] for the past couple of years, both Grant and I have been team leaders. I was confident that I would be named captain, but there's always a slim chance that some didn't recognize or appreciate my efforts and intensity," said Peter.

The process for selecting the Husker team captains is relatively

simple. Described Wistrom, "Coach Osborne hands out a ballot to all team members who reported early to fall camp. Only seniors are listed on the ballot. Instructions are for defensive players to vote for two guys on defense and offensive players to vote for two seniors who play offense. Everyone marks their votes and then we have practice. At the end of practice, Coach Osborne announces the results while the team is on the field."

Indeed, justice was served on August 23 as both Peter and Wistrom were elected two of the four co-captains. The real suspense would now be the selection of the remaining captains. All-American offensive lineman Aaron Taylor and tight end Vershan Jackson were announced as the other Husker leaders.

"When Coach Osborne made the announcement, it made official what I already knew. It was confirmed that I was viewed as a capable leader," said Peter. In fact, Peter followed the footsteps of his brother, Christian, who some regard as one of Nebraska's best-ever team captains, helping lead the 1995 Huskers to a second consecutive national title. The Peter brothers are the third set of Husker siblings to earn the distinction of captain following Erik (1991) and Zach (1994) Wiegert, and Mike (1983) and Andy (1988) Keeler.

"To me," said Peter, "I consider being elected team captain one of the greatest honors a football player can receive. It's not determined by a bunch of media writers, it's your fellow teammates who are your equal saying, 'We look up to you and we want you to lead us!'"

Concerning the 1997 Husker captains, Peter believes they all complimented one another and represented the team and state proudly. Peter gave his captain-by-captain analysis. "Grant has a tremendous work ethic and has a very intense way about him. Aaron Taylor is more soft spoken and leads by example, while Vershan was the vocal leader on the offense. We needed a guy like Vershan because he could bring out the lighter side of players, especially when the tension was almost unbearable."

Although Wistrom acknowledged that other seniors were also

capable of representing the team, he feels all captains were appropriate selections. "We've all paid our dues both on and off the field, and I think each captain brings something different to the table."

Wistrom had his own version of the captain breakdown. "Vershan appealed to some of the players that Jason and I had a harder time reaching. He could motivate some of his peers probably better than Jason and I could. Taylor was a good choice because he had been the leader of the offensive line and we definitely needed to keep that group highly motivated and determined concerning the style of football we played. Jason was probably the only lock to be named captain. Everyone on the team looked up to him. He was the most intense guy on the team who had unbelievable motivation. Jason was one of those guys who was capable of raising the level of play a notch or two for every player, including me. Jason was also a very vocal person and not afraid to confront a teammate when they were messing up," summarized Wistrom.

On his own attributes as a Nebraska football team captain, Wistrom offers, "I worked hard every day and approached every practice with the idea that I needed to get better. I've always thought, if you're not getting better, you are getting worse. I try to focus every day and go as hard as I possibly can."

As Peter and Wistrom see it, some responsibilities remained the same while others were quite different and highly anticipated. "Our roles continued to be like they were all throughout winter and summer conditioning. We did our best to maintain our leadership at all times and constantly motivate the team to give it their all no matter what the circumstances," explained Wistrom.

Something new for Peter and Wistrom would be their pregame ritual. Typically, Peter and Wistrom were two of the last players out of the Husker locker room on game day and now were two of the first, along with Taylor and Jackson. Envisioning what it was going to be like being the first players on the field, Wistrom said, "I thought it would be pretty intense from a mental standpoint. The emotion wouldn't come until the tunnel walk when the entire team would join us on the field."

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Added Peter, "I saw the captains walking out to the field as a business trip. The game started with that walk as we needed to be confident in our actions and leave an impression on the other team."

After being fan-friendly at the annual photo day to thousands of Husker faithful, Peter, Wistrom, and company were now seven days and counting before opening day 1997.

Opening Day 1997 Huskers vs. Akron

Not a day too soon—opening day 1997, Big Red Saturday—August 30 had finally arrived. In front of the 215th consecutive Memorial Stadium sellout crowd on a hot, muggy afternoon, the Huskers were primed to kick off the season against the Akron Zips from Ohio. First up, the Husker co-captains would take the field, and just like when they did so for the first time as Cornhuskers, the butterflies were flying high. “I was definitely anxious when the call for captains came,” recalled Peter. He continued, “The four of us were being sent out to represent the team. There was a mixture of nervousness and satisfaction.”

Said Wistrom, “When the captains were taking the field, it hit me that the four of us were the generals of the football team.” As the captains approached midfield, feelings became increasingly intense. Said Wistrom, “I’d liken it to a stare down in a boxing match. It’s your best leaders versus their best leaders and at that point the battle lines are drawn. It’s a whole different atmosphere when, before the kickoff, you are looking the opponent in the eye and you can see they are either ready to play or they don’t want to be on the same field with us because they know they are in for 60 minutes of all-out football,” illustrated Wistrom.

Once the stare down is complete, the players are asked to exchange greetings. “With an attitude, I slap their hands basically because you have to. Deep down, you don’t even want to shake their hands because you are going to hate these guys for the next 60

minutes. I'll be glad to shake their hands and friendly up after the game is over," expressed Peter.

The next order of business is the coin toss. Explained Wistrom, "The visiting team always gets to make the call. Coach Osborne instructs us that if we win the toss, to defer the ball to the second half, and if we lose, to take the wind at our back for the first quarter."

Perhaps the most cherished time for the Husker team, and especially for the captains, comes when the players share some final moments shortly before taking the field. "Coach Osborne leads a prayer in the locker room and then only players remain," said Wistrom. Each captain takes their turn in an attempt to motivate their peers.

"We could have been reading a storybook to the guys, and with this being the first game, they still would have been ready to go," said Peter. Purposefully, the talks have a gradual escalation in intensity with Taylor leading, followed by Vershan Jackson. Wistrom would go next with Peter going cleanup.

"Basically, I told the team that we would go out and dominate Akron. They shouldn't even be in the stadium. We are on a different level," concluded Wistrom.

Peter comments, "The gist of my talk was, 'Hey, we've worked too hard, from running stadium stairs to not missing a day of summer workouts, to let anything stand in our way. We have paid our dues, we are ready and we will win,'" concluded Peter.

Ask any team captain, locker room talks can be a challenge, especially considering the perceived value and importance of the final buildup before the game begins. Peter and Wistrom hope they are up to the challenge of coming up with just the right talk before every game. "Actually, the night before the game, I put some thought into the pregame talk I'm going to deliver to the team," said Peter. "I hope I have enough good stuff to carry out throughout the season."

In actuality, by the time Peter's turn arrives, the locker room is in such a frenzy that little has to be said by Peter. "Things are so emotional by my turn and the guys are so loud that I wonder if the

guys can even hear my message. Sure the message helps, but I think the guys get just as charged up by watching how intense we get. I mean, it's just as much fun if not more of a physical display of emotion. We are hitting each other on the pads and banging things, and of course Vershan gets the whole locker room bouncing up and down," explained Peter. He continued, "Sometimes I get so intense, you almost feel as if you could pass out. My face is as red as my jersey, my eyes are bugging, and my veins are popping. At that point, I'm wondering why I am doing this when I have to go out and play a game in just a few minutes."

Wistrom answers, "This is the last opportunity to build team unity and confidence before competition and it's important to get the team as fired up as possible."

For the most part, the Huskers took to heart the message shared by the team captains prior to the Akron game. Nebraska scored on 9 of 12 drives, and the services of punter Jesse Kosch would not be needed on the way to a 59-14 win.

Despite the lopsided score, the general consensus was that there was plenty of room for improvement. "I thought the offense played pretty good and the defense didn't put forth the necessary effort against Akron," said Peter. In fact, Peter felt significant improvements would be needed before the highly anticipated showdown with Washington on September 20. "If we go to Washington and play like this, we'll get our butts kicked." Added Peter, "I was really disappointed with the number of yards and points Akron racked up on our defense. Plain and simple, it shouldn't have happened."

According to Wistrom, during and after the game, many thoughts were running through his mind. "I was wondering if our defense was as good as we thought and will we be able to correct our mistakes. I truly felt there were many question marks about our defense after the Akron game and that if we didn't make adjustments and pick up the pace, it could be a very long season," summarized Wistrom. In fact, Wistrom went as far as questioning the hearts of the entire Blackshirt unit. "I definitely questioned the

fortitude of our defense after the game, and I know for sure, the coaching staff was far from satisfied."

Both during halftime and after the game, Coach McBride let his analysis of the defensive effort be known. "Coach McBride isn't one to sugarcoat anything and basically said that if you want to win eight or nine games and play in the Slippery Bowl or Poulan Weedeater Bowl, continue playing like we did against Akron," remembered Wistrom. "Coach McBride is a person you never want to let down. This guy knows how to evaluate a defense. He knows what it takes and has coached many great players. We knew if we wanted to be national champions we would have to take to heart his assessment and act on his challenges."

Peter's final take on the defensive effort of the game was similar to that of a roller coaster. "At times we played okay, and then we would give up the big play. I think that is to be expected of a young defense. I honestly don't think everyone on defense fully understood what it took to play on a national championship-caliber defense. You simply have to go all out 110 percent at all times in order to leave no doubt. Our defense didn't go all out and to me, it was ridiculous, and at times, embarrassing that Akron did what they did to our defense," concluded Peter.

Not only were Peter and Wistrom disappointed in the defensive effort against Akron, they were equally dejected by their respective individual performances. Peter, who was credited with four total tackles, one being unassisted, was not surprisingly critical of his play. "I really thought I played poorly. I remember sitting in meetings on the Monday after the game and Coach Osborne announced that I was the defensive player of the game. Grant told me that was a joke and I would have to agree that I wasn't deserving. I just felt I didn't play to my standard and in no way was remotely close to satisfied with my performance or effort," exclaimed Peter.

Wistrom was also dejected with his effort against the Zips. "I wouldn't even rank my performance as satisfactory, and simply knew that I would have to really buckle down and start playing better football or I could be considered one of the biggest busts of

the college football season," feared Wistrom. Wistrom finished the game with just three total tackles, one unassisted.

Despite not being happy with the defensive performance and their own individual efforts, Peter and Wistrom did take away some memorable moments from the first victory of the season. One game highlight was the memorable first quarter 20-yard touchdown run by fullback Joel Makovicka. Said Wistrom, "Joel's a great player and runs tough all the time. He has unbelievable balance and his feet never stop moving. He will hit a little seam, and just like that, he's gone for 20 to 30 yards." Continued Wistrom, "Joel is a tough kid and I have the utmost respect for the guy. He always works hard, never complains, and is a team player."

Peter was also impressed with Makovicka's play of the day but had only one complaint. "In the days to come, I saw that run one too many times. Come on, enough is enough, and if anyone is going to get that type of 'pub,' it should be the best looking guy on the team—me of course," joked Peter.

Another complaint of Peter and Wistrom came on a punt shortly before halftime when an Akron player, linebacker George Cameron, threw up after the play. Cameron apparently was ill prior to the game and took some Maalox before surrendering to the humid conditions and the Huskers. Wistrom recalls the unfortunate turn of events. "The ball was placed on the right hash near the north end zone and the puke was right where the defense was lining up. The officials tried to get former Husker Danny Noonan to clean up the mess, and finally, a trainer made a marginal effort of soaking up the puke. I was almost sick to my stomach seeing and smelling the spot and was fearful I'd be taking my defensive stance right in the midst of it all," summarized Wistrom.

Some might be surprised to read that big, tough All-American football players like Peter and Wistrom were unable to stomach what another player couldn't. "If the puke would have been a bone-crushing hit I made against Washington in a tight game, I might of thought it was a pretty cool deal and even displayed some emotion. But not when you're up against Akron and the guy tosses his

cookies after no contact and simply because it was too hot," explained Peter.

Even though there were certainly some bright spots in the Huskers' first victory of the season, Peter summarized the game much like Akron linebacker Cameron felt. "I know he was hoping to feel better and I was hoping we would get better," said Peter.

Peter, Wistrom, and the Huskers would have an extra week of preparation to get ready for the University of Central Florida game on September 13.

Game 2 - Central Florida The Rout that Wasn't

Even though the 1997 Nebraska football schedule clearly identified Central Florida as the next opponent on the Huskers' path to a national championship, Coach Tom Osborne and the team would use the week off to begin preparations against highly-ranked and talented Washington. "It just makes common sense that we would need more work to get ready for Washington than we would Central Florida. Even though we knew Central Florida was a high-quality team, Washington was feared as the beast of college football and picked by many to win it all. Bottom line is nobody ever questions Coach Osborne's preparations for games," summarized Peter.

Some might find it contradictory or surprising that Nebraska devoted extra time for the Huskies with Central Florida next up, especially after what most regard as a mediocre first game. Typically, coaches and athletes preach the one-game-at-a-time mentality, but in actuality, that is rarely the case. "Sure you always say 'one game at a time,'" said Wistrom. "The truth of the matter is that every time I stepped into the weight room during the off-season or onto the sweltering hot field during the summer workouts, I was thinking about playing Washington. I agree with the so-called football experts, Nebraska should beat the Akron's and Central Florida's by lining up and playing the game. To beat the elite, you need to get every possible edge and I applaud Coach Osborne for anticipating the big hurdles, and to know how and when to get us ready."

The Huskers unanimously held Washington in high regard during the preseason, and after having the opportunity to witness the Huskies throttle BYU on September 6 (Nebraska's off Saturday), fans and media were making Washington out to be invincible and unbeatable. Peter thought differently after watching Washington's impressive performance against the Cougars of BYU. "It's habit for me, when I watch any game, to zero in on the guys up front. I felt like our front four could pressure the quarterback harder than the BYU players did," assessed Peter. "After the game, everyone was talking about Washington this and Washington that and hinting that we might not be able to hold them down. My thoughts were, 'Yes, they are a good team but definitely beatable.'" Peter had enough savvy not to express more specific thoughts and provide bulletin board material for the Huskies, but he quietly and confidently felt the Blackshirts would be able to put excessive pressure on the quarterback throughout the entire game. Only time would tell, but now it was definitely time to redirect full attention to the Central Florida Knights, a game now just a week away.

Going into the Central Florida game, the Huskers knew the game would be a good challenge; but few anticipated Nebraska trailing at halftime and not gaining complete control of the game until the final quarter. "We knew that stopping Culpepper would be the key to the outcome of the game," said Wistrom. Actually, the Huskers and Wistrom knew that Central Florida was a team of talented athletes that most likely, in the very near future, would become a mainstay in the Top 25 football rankings. Actually, all things considered, people shouldn't be shocked that the Huskers struggled to pull out a 38-24 hard-fought victory. For months, fans and media had been locked in on the September 20 clash between the Huskers and the Huskies. Many bashed Coach Osborne and Athletic Director Bill Byrne for having two apparent patsies in Akron and Central Florida on the Husker schedule. In fact, many suspected that the Zips and the Golden Knights were coming to Lincoln to collect the big payday and just go through the motions on the field. Somebody forgot to tell Daunte Culpepper of such

nonsense and the Huskers would still have to go out and earn the win under what was really a no-win situation.

The 6-foot-4-inch Culpepper proved to be strong, mobile, and a major nemesis for the Husker Blackshirts. He completed 24 of 35 attempts for 318 yards and one touchdown while rushing for another. "He's an amazing athlete, the type you might come across once in a season. He could be playing for any football power in the country and definitely has all the tools to make a living on Sundays. My hat is off to him and I hope he's on my team in the pro ranks," said Wistrom. Culpepper led the charge and sent shock waves throughout the nation as word started to spread that Central Florida went into the locker room at halftime with a 17-14 advantage.

Once again, Charlie McBride, the defensive coordinator, had some direct words with the Husker defense during intermission. "He told us we were terrible and need to wake up. He told us it was ridiculous that Central Florida was hanging on and something to the effect that we better shape up or we were about to make the biggest headlines since the Iowa State upset a few years back," remembered Wistrom.

Without question, the Blackshirts struggled, not only giving up 365 yards and 24 points but multiple big plays as well. "Once again we had some major busts and gave up some big plays. Still, we found a way to win and maybe even showed some character by not getting rattled," said Peter. He continued, "I think it showed that our attention was partially on Washington and I'm convinced we were still searching for our chemistry on defense."

The old adage, "when it rains, it pours," was definitely true on Saturday, September 13. Despite beautiful weather, the second quarter was especially bad for Nebraska and specifically Peter. Not only did the Huskers find themselves on the short end of the score, but for a while, the status of preseason All-American and emotional leader Peter was in doubt. Before halftime, Peter injured his left knee. "Initially when it happened, I thought, 'That's it. It's my ACL.' I've never had a knee injury so I had nothing to compare the injury to. I had some extreme pain running through my knee and right away I

thought my season was over and everything I worked so hard for over the years was ruined with one play. I mean, a million thoughts were rushing through my head, from not being able to play in the game to never realizing my goal of the National Football League."

Peter continued, "The trainers immediately took me in for X-rays and it showed that the back side of my knee was stretched and the bones in the front had come together. Basically, I had hyper-extended my knee." The ultimate competitor, Peter was able to convince the trainers that he was capable of returning to competition in the third quarter. "At that point we were down, and my automatic reaction was, I had to go back in and play. I played through the soreness and remember not being able to bend my left knee on Sunday morning," explained the gutsy Peter. Indeed, Peter would return to action and finish the game helping the Huskers to a come-from-behind victory. Peter managed four tackles with two being unassisted.

Further complications during the Nebraska-Central Florida contest came in the second quarter when starting quarterback Scott Frost returned to the field after second-string quarterback Frankie London engineered a 65-yard scoring drive, racing the final eight yards himself. As was determined prior to the game, Frost would reenter the game, but unexpectedly did so to a chorus of boos primarily from the student sections. "I really didn't know Frost was being booed. When the defense comes off the field, the only thing on my mind is water; and then, either Coach Bohl or McBride is in our face drawing up schemes," said Peter. He added, "After the game, a reporter asked me my reaction to Scott being booed and I indicated that was news to me. I went on to tell the guy that Scott is our man and all that matters is that the team is behind him and we realize he is our best and most experienced quarterback."

Wistrom was embarrassed by the way teammate Frost was treated. "For some reason, people are determined to bag on Scott and I don't fully understand why. When he is out there, he is leading the team the best way he possibly can. Hey, the guy is 20-some years old and none of us are professionals. Mistakes are inevitable

and his stick out more because of the visibility of his position," described Wistrom. "Sure Frankie did a great job, but I was definitely embarrassed when the boo birds came out upon Scott reentering the game. It really upset me and shook me. I guess because I always held the highest esteem for our fans and the positive reception we unanimously receive. From that moment on, I kind of felt Scott, and maybe even the team, had a rally cry and this might be just what the doctor ordered to raise everyone's level of play and silence the critics."

One thing was for sure—after the Huskers escaped the Central Florida game with the all-important "W," Peter said, "It was back to the drawing board, and a great week of practice would be critical, otherwise the battle in Seattle could get out of control in a bad way."

Game 3 - Washington Perceptions Corrected

Heading into the battle in Seattle against the No. 2-ranked mighty Washington Huskies, perceptions were that the Nebraska football program had possibly taken a step backward. Indeed, the college football world was talking about Nebraska, but this time, not because of their traditional championship dominance. Rather it was because of what many called “ho-hum” wins against Akron and Central Florida, a defense that would bend at times, and the fans’ discontent with starting quarterback Scott Frost.

Husker co-captain Jason Peter could sense the doubters. “Because of two mediocre victories, people were writing us off. People didn’t think we were the same Nebraska, and to a degree, that puzzled and angered me,” said Peter. “I mean, really, last year we were one game from being in a national championship game for the fourth straight year and probably one player away from an unprecedented third national title.” (Terrell Farley is the player Peter was referring to who could have swayed the tide against Texas and ultimately again in the Sugar Bowl.)

The Washington game had opportunity written all over it. “To me, fans either love Nebraska or they hate Nebraska. We went into the Washington game with a big chip on our shoulders,” remembered Wistrom. “We were determined to prove to the nation that we were still a powerhouse and a force to be reckoned with. When our team is doubted, I think we put forth our very best effort.”

Time would tell if Peter, Wistrom, and the Huskers would rise

near the top of the college football world. One thing was for sure—early on in the week, the Huskers could tell that a big game was approaching. “All games are big, but when you show up at the regular Tuesday press conference, you can quickly gauge the importance of the game by the number of cameras. Prior to the Washington game, I’d say there were at least 100 cameras in the lounge for the weekly conference,” estimated Wistrom. “I did interviews with ESPN and Kirk Herbstreit of College Gameday. Heck, former Husker Trev Alberts of CNN SI even got into the act doing a feature on Scott Frost. Typically things are pretty much the same week in and week out. Tuesday is the press conference, Wednesday is the most difficult practice of the week, Thursday is primarily mental, and Friday is a walk-through.”

Getting prepared for the Washington game was exciting and intense. “We knew the game was going to be a dogfight and I’d have to say we had one of our best practice weeks I can remember in my five-year career. Nothing had to be said and we didn’t have to go around and tell guys to wake up and pick it up, Washington is Saturday. Guys were just flying around with all-out intensity and focus,” remembered Peter.

Added Wistrom, “It was also kind of a different feeling getting prepared for a game as the underdog. Usually everyone is gunning for us. It was fun to go after another team and not have all the immense pressure on us.”

Saturdays are nuts, and Peter, Wistrom, and the Huskers were well aware of the environment they would encounter in Seattle. “We knew Washington was rumored to have the loudest stadium in college football with the noise reflecting off the water, the bleachers, and the overhang. Like always, however, Coach Osborne prepared us well for the noise issue and we had a plan on how to silence the crowd,” said Peter.

Coach Osborne has coached many big games during his stellar 25-year tenure and according to the players, no matter who the opponent, his demeanor is typically the same. “No question. For the most part, Coach Osborne treats every game the same,” said Peter.

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"He is a master at building our confidence and having us prepared for the situation at hand. For the Washington game, he repeatedly told us not to be shocked with some initial crowd noise, and by the way we started the game, we could quickly make them a non-factor."

Prior to the team departing from the hotel and busing to the stadium, a brief motivational psyche-up tape was viewed by the team. This tape would rival the tape shown to the Huskers shortly before the 1996 Fiesta Bowl in which the Huskers would rattle Florida, claiming the 1995 National Championship. The Washington psyche-up tape featured remarks exclusively from Peter and Wistrom. "My message was that we are the hardest working team in the country and there is no way we are going to let some punk team that has no reason beating us ruin our season and a shot at the national title," exclaimed Wistrom. "I reminded the guys that we are a team, we love each other, and we care for each other. When we play for one another, there is absolutely no team that can beat us."

Recalled Peter, "After watching the video, which included a series of game highlights, guys walked out of the room with their eyes wide open and it was clear to me that everyone came to play."

Less than one hour before game time, Wistrom, like many, was convinced the play and confidence level of Frost would go a long way in determining the outcome of the game. "Before the game, I went up to Scott and I could tell by looking in his eyes, he was focused and determined. I could just sense that Scott was going to get the job done. I told him, 'You are 1-0 in this stadium and today you are going to make it 2-0.' And he looked at me and said, 'Yes, we are going to get it done today.'" Continued Wistrom, "That was the first time I could sense an overpowering degree of confidence in Scott. I just knew we were going to roll and could tell that Scott was going to show his leadership skills."

Not only would Frost shine on a beautiful, sunny day in Seattle, but the Blackshirts came up big in the game, especially on the first drive holding the high-powered Huskies scoreless after missing a field goal. "Our opening defensive stand was huge in terms of crowd

noise," said Peter. "Holding them without any points immediately calmed the storm. And what Frost and the offense would soon do, all but made the crowd a non-factor," Peter exclaimed. Frost engineered an impressive 80-yard scoring drive capping off the series with a determined 34-yard jaunt to the end zone. "He showed me some true grit and determination on that drive, and when he came off the field, I went over to him and gave him my congratulations. I think he appreciated that and it was important for him to know that the players, especially the leaders, really care about him," explained Peter. "I wanted to personally show him and tell him that he had my support and respect. I told him you are our man and will get us to a national championship."

Nothing would hold back Frost and the Huskers, and possibly the heart-to-heart with team captains Peter and Wistrom served as motivation for Frost. On the next series, Frost once again looked exceptional directing a 56-yard scoring drive culminating with a 30-yard scamper. Not only did Frost, Ahman Green, Joel Makovicka, and the rest of the Husker offense sparkle racking up 384 rushing yards and 472 total yards, the Blackshirts clearly came to play. "We were able to get unbelievable penetration up front and that was the key to the game," according to Peter.

Coach Charlie McBride and the Blackshirts had indeed been holding back certain schemes for the Washington game. However, they managed to dominate the Huskies without revealing their full arsenal of plays. "For the most part, we only rushed our front four and only blitzed the linebackers once or twice in the whole game," said Wistrom. Wistrom would figure into a big, early play by tackling phenom Husky quarterback Brock Huard on what appeared to be an insignificant hit. During the first quarter, Wistrom pressured Huard and just after Huard's release, tackled him around the ankles.

Recalled Wistrom, "If he would have stood in the pocket and taken the hit, nothing would have happened. As I was coming at him, he started to run away from me and I just dove at him trying to get pressure on him anyway that I could and apparently landed

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on his foot. I didn't think I hurt him; but when he got up, he started to limp around and then left after a couple more plays. To me, that was a statement of his toughness. You are in a huge game with national title implications on the line and you leave the game with a sprained ankle. No way could you have kept me off the field at a time like that," said Wistrom. Huard's backup, freshman Marques Tuiasosopo, proved to be a gamer playing admirably and connecting for several big pass plays with split end Jerome Pathon, who snared five balls for 195 yards.

As in previous games, the defense was frustrated with giving up the big plays and still felt the chemistry wasn't totally intact. Wistrom was also frustrated and puzzled with the antics of sidelined quarterback Huard. "During television timeouts when our defense stayed on the field and their entire offense went to the sideline, Huard would be over there taunting Jason and me pointing at his leg, and by reading his lips, it was clear he thought I gave him a cheap shot. Hardly," said Wistrom. "A cheap shot is when you blindside the quarterback after he releases the ball and my hit was about as minor as I ever apply."

Huard remained animated throughout the game about his injury and after the Huskers' impressive 27-14 win, Wistrom attempted to make amends with Huard. "After the game, we were walking off the field and he told me, 'That was a cheap hit you laid on me and if you were a real man, you would take me high and not low.'" Wistrom's reply, "Hey, I'm sorry it happened but that's part of football. Really, I wish it wouldn't have happened." Huard didn't buy into that and Wistrom walked off perplexed.

In analyzing the Huskers' victory, Peter and Wistrom recognized several keys. "Hats off to the offense," said Peter. "They looked awesome, especially the line."

Added Wistrom, "Based on the way the line played, I think if Jason played fullback and I played I-back, we each could have run for a 100-plus yards. Our offensive line was blowing guys off the ball and getting eight or nine yards at will. They looked like the Big Red machine of two years ago."

Peter also credits the Husker fans for showing their true colors. "We had heard before the game that maybe four or five thousand Huskers fans, at best, would be in the stadium. It was more like ten thousand and they were a vocal ten thousand."

"We certainly appreciate all of the fans who traveled across the country to support us during a critical game," added Wistrom. In fact, Wistrom, Peter, and other Husker players typically try to personally thank the Husker faithful by saluting Husker sections and getting them roused up before entering the locker room.

During the return flight to Lincoln, the mood was obviously very celebratory and upbeat. As he almost always does when approaching Lincoln, Coach Osborne took the plane's public address microphone to once again congratulate the team for a great effort, then cautioned them about how to handle themselves. Recalled Peter, "Coach really doesn't say much anymore because I think he believes the players really understand the boundaries. Coach Osborne has his back against the wall and when players get out of line, he simply can't let them play."

Although confident their peers will exercise good judgment in the community, Peter and Wistrom acknowledge some nervous moments now that they are team captains. "Sure, in the back of your mind you worry who did what or fear that when you open the paper or answer the phone you might get the news that somebody got in some trouble," said Peter. "It's one of many team goals every year to have no off-field problems. We hope nothing ever happens, but odds are that out of 160-some football players on the team, somebody might make a poor decision every now and then."

Peter and Wistrom feel that they have mellowed throughout their stay in the Nebraska program. "Especially now that we are both captains, we have responsibilities to the entire team and to Coach Osborne," explained Wistrom. "Any little slip up is going to bring up all of the past troubles and open the flood gates again. Personally, I'm really proud of all the players for staying out of trouble and using good judgment."

Upon returning to Lincoln late Saturday evening, the Huskers

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were greeted by approximately 200 fans at the airport. "That really made us feel good, kind of like the receptions we received after winning the national championships. It was as if people were starting to believe that we are close to being back on top of the college football world," explained Wistrom.

Before Peter and Wistrom would call it a night, they would spend some time downtown and then head home. "We were both up at 5:00 the next morning still on such a high from the game. We went to Perkins and had breakfast and just kind of rehashed the game," said Peter. "After a big win like we had against Washington, you are just wired. It's the pinnacle of what you play for. A big win in a big game."

Next up would be another matchup with an undefeated, nationally-ranked team as the Huskers would host the 17th-ranked Kansas State Wildcats after another week off.

Game 4 - Kansas State Keeping the Machine Rolling

If it were up to the Huskers, they would have just as soon not had another open week and build upon the momentum established after the Washington victory. "It was certainly weird to have two off-weeks so early in the season. It felt as if we had been practicing forever and not getting to play enough games. We had been practicing almost two full months and found ourselves with only three games in the books," said Peter.

"With the off-week before Kansas State, it would be the job of the captains to keep the intensity high and make sure everyone remains focused," added Wistrom.

"Personally, I think it was good that we had Kansas State after an off-week because we knew they were a serious threat and we would have to be sharp in order to keep things rolling in the right direction," remarked Peter.

"With Kansas State on the horizon, there was definitely some excitement in the air," remembered Wistrom. "Guys were fired up knowing we were playing a Top 20, undefeated team under the lights and on television. With all of that combined, I was confident you would see another great effort by the entire team."

He added, "The level of game play can often be determined by how well the team practices and it was a very physical week of practice. An easy week of practice does nobody any good in our quest for a championship. We want to get better with every practice and every game. Every game is do or die. You lose at this point and all of your goals are basically shattered."

Game day Saturday, October 4 finally arrived and, due to television and a 6:07 p.m. start time, the Huskers would have more time on their hands than usual in anticipation of kickoff. "Sometimes it's hard having to wait around for a night game, but I didn't sense that for the K-State game. Everyone was really juiced about the night game and playing under the new set of permanent lights at Memorial Stadium. In a way, it was like a dedication of the stadium of sorts," expressed Peter.

Some pregame comments made by starting Wildcat center Kendyl Jacox helped add fuel to the Blackshirts' fire. "He said that they will be able to establish a running game against us and that really wasn't a smart comment to make," said Peter.

"I agree, that's not very smart," said Wistrom.

Prior to kickoff during the traditional players-only pep talk, Peter's words of wisdom went with the history of the rivalry. "I told the team that K-State hadn't beat a Nebraska team in 28 straight years and I'll be darned if our team breaks the string. After that, it was pretty much a bunch of yelling and people acting like idiots and morons. You don't know at the time what you're saying, you're just in a zone trying to bring the team to a fever-pitch," remarked Peter.

The Huskers didn't disappoint the Husker fans, making it 29 consecutive wins against Kansas State with a convincing 56-26 victory on a beautiful night for football. The Huskers amassed nearly 500 total yards on offense, while making Jacox eat his words by limiting the Wildcat rushing attack to just 98 yards on 40 attempts.

Wistrom was pleased with the defensive effort. "I think we showed flashes of what this defense can become. We had Erwin Swiney and Eric Johnson in the starting lineup for the first time and by the middle of the third quarter, we limited them to zero rushing yards." Wistrom recorded five tackles, two for losses, which allowed him to surpass Trev Alberts for the school record for tackles for a loss. Wistrom's school record is now at 45 ½ tackles for minus-197 yards. "Honestly, I knew I didn't have far to go for the record and thought I'd get it before the Kansas State game. It didn't work out that way, but I'm glad to have that done and out of the way." One

of Wistrom's other individual goals was to become the all-time sack leader at Nebraska. "I've got one sack after four games. Let's see, I need to get 11 more in 9 games. Probably doubtful. As far as I'm concerned, forget the personal goals and records. As long as we are playing in Miami at the end of the season, I'll be satisfied."

For a brief moment during the game, it appeared as if Wistrom might not see the rest of the Kansas State game after sustaining an injury in the first half. "Chad Kelsay hit the quarterback in the back and I hit him in the front so he didn't give, and like an idiot, I had my head down using poor tackling technique and it stretched all of my back muscles. I couldn't breathe momentarily," recalled Wistrom. He was sidelined for three plays, then reentered the game.

"To be honest with you, I didn't even realize he came off the field," said best buddy Peter of Wistrom's injury and brief absence from the line up. "Once I could see another guy was in there, I realized Grant had to be hurt to leave the game. I was hoping it was just a play or two and he'd come back. Your worse fear is that it would be a career-ending injury." Concluded Peter, "If there is one guy on defense we can't afford to lose, it is definitely Grant."

Ask almost anyone who the emotional leaders of the Blackshirts are and you will find two common replies, Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom! Perhaps their spirit and love for the game is more noticeable in large part due to their celebrations after impact plays. "When you make a big play in a big game, your emotions are running high. A celebration of some sort is inevitable. I think it's expected by the crowd and they enjoy seeing us look like complete morons," described Wistrom. "Bottom line is, the fans love it and it keeps us fired up. It really allows me to hear the crowd and let them experience the emotion I'm feeling. The celebration is a release of all your hard work. Deep down inside you may know you improved during the off-season, but when you go out and make a big play, then everyone knows you improved."

Peter is relieved when he makes a big play for the Husker defense. "It feels good to get that first big play behind you. People expect players like Grant and me to make some major plays, and

when we do, it takes a load of pressure off us and then we can just go out and play. People notice the great individual plays but sometimes fail to notice that guys like Grant and I often have two or three guys hanging on our jerseys at all times," said Peter.

The actual celebrations demonstrated by Peter and Wistrom . . . well, that's another point of discussion. "Grant spazzes out and doesn't have a trademark celebration. Personally, I've been throwing up a lot of skeleton crossbones with my arms and have found that to be well received," explained Peter.

According to Wistrom, Peter's celebrations should be better. "Hey, I've seen the guy choreograph the night before a game in the hotel room what his celebration moves are going to be like after a big play. I told Jason, 'Hey, you need to lighten up and be more spontaneous.'"

Peter encourages Wistrom to consider putting some thoughts into his post big-play celebrations. "Grant is still a rookie. I felt bad for him and his family after his first sack in the Kickoff Classic against West Virginia and also against Kansas State. He looked like a helicopter twirling around," concluded Peter.

All jokes aside, Peter and Wistrom are careful not to push the celebrations to the limit in fear of drawing a 15-yard penalty. "Every now and then we get warned by the refs, but the bottom line is to be quick and not draw attention to yourself," said Peter.

The Huskers as a whole hope to receive plenty of attention in the coming months in pursuit of the national championship. "We've made it through two very tough games in Washington and Kansas State. I don't see a letdown as guys are starting to believe that we have what it takes to play for the whole ball of wax, or in this case, crystal," said Peter. "As captains, it is our job to keep the team focused and understand that you better show up to play week in and week out, but to also keep images of palm trees, beaches and bikinis in the back of your mind."

Game 5 - Baylor Wacko in Waco

With visions of Miami and the national championship game firmly in place, the Huskers would get their first taste of a bad weather game when traveling to Waco, Texas, for the Big 12 road test against the Baylor Bears. As Peter recalls, the trip got off to a slow start. "We had continual delays out of Lincoln as a result of plane complications and also near hurricane-like weather in Waco," remembered Peter. All things considered, he added, road games are preferred by many players and even the coaches. "If the flights or bus rides aren't super long, I don't mind going on the road. There is a strong sense of togetherness and family when we travel. Also, when on the road, I think there are less distractions to deal with and it's much easier to focus on the task at hand," Peter concluded.

The task at hand would be the Baylor Bears on October 11, and despite the so-called experts rating this game as a sure-fire blowout, the Iowa State game of 1992 still served as a vivid reminder that no games should be taken for granted. Indeed, the Huskers would have to go through all the motions just like any other game.

When the Huskers go on the road, the first thing they typically do upon arrival is go to the stadium for a brief walk-through. The walk-throughs, according to Peter, are always beneficial. "The main purpose is to get a feel for the turf and to create a comfort level so everything doesn't seem so foreign on game day. I also think the walk-throughs begin to set the stage for the game and gradually get everyone in the frame of mind that game time isn't too far off and that we are on a business trip."

Peter, Wistrom, and company were especially glad they had the chance for a walk-through at Floyd Casey Stadium. Recalled Wistrom, "I'll just say the field wasn't player-friendly. They had a Big 12 logo near the 25-yard line that was as hard as concrete and the turf was extremely worn with the field stripes raised up about a quarter of an inch. The field is the same for both teams, but I'm just glad to have the chance to know where potential problems lie." As time would tell, the field might present the greatest challenge and obstacle to the Huskers.

Going into the game, the Huskers were well aware that Baylor also had great athletes on their team, especially on offense. "We knew they had lots of team speed but weren't nearly as big or strong as us. We really felt like we could exploit their offensive line," said Wistrom.

As game time approached on a less than ideal evening in Waco, the Husker team drew inspiration from the captains. "Basically our message was, 'Hey, we have lots of guys from Texas on our team and let's make it a memorable homecoming for them.' We also truly believed, and their coach even agreed, that Baylor wasn't ready to be considered close to our level," recalled Peter.

Fortunately, the Huskers are self-motivated, as for the first time since the Orange Bowl against Virginia Tech, the Big Red would play in front of a less than capacity crowd. "To me, it just shows the difference in the level of the two programs. Nebraska is rich in tradition with consecutive sellouts and Baylor is in a rebuilding process. Without question, it's easier to get emotionally ready for a big game in front of a sellout crowd. But it's still a game and bottom line is you only have 12 or 13 a year, so you should cherish each game irregardless of the crowd," said Wistrom.

Early on it appeared the Huskers might have a true test against the Bears. Just 17 seconds after Ahman Green opened the scoring with a 3-yard run, Baylor running back Jerod Douglas ripped off an 80-yard touchdown scamper knotting the game at 7-7. Recalled Peter, "It was definitely an early wake-up call and it made the defense very mad. Despite our anger, the defense wasn't overly

concerned as we got caught in a bad defense and felt like the play was a bit of a fluke. We were determined not to give up another big play."

Added Wistrom, "Certainly we wish the play wouldn't have happened, but you do have to give the guy some credit. Once he hit the seam and got out in the open, he flat out ran away from everyone."

The Husker Blackshirts definitely settled down and Ahman Green, Scott Frost, and company racked up a total of 548 yards, and for the most part, could not be stopped. In fact, the Huskers had 42 points at halftime and appeared to be scheming on how not to score instead of score more. The Baylor game brought back visions of the 1995 Nebraska-Arizona State game when the game was clearly decided before halftime and possible allegations of running up the score might surface.

Wistrom feels Coach Osborne is always sensitive about not embarrassing a program by running up the score. "Obviously, when we are on the opposing team's 16-yard line with 10 or 11 seconds left in the half and run a dive up the middle, we have called off the dogs and aren't looking for more," explained Wistrom. "If we score 80 points with our backups in the game, then that is more the other team's fault, not Nebraska's or Coach Osborne's. Maybe those teams should put forth more effort into the off-season and spend less time pointing the finger."

Yet another aspect of a blowout score is the issue of playing time. "The starters practice hard all week and we would just as soon play all 60 minutes game in and game out. It's kind of your reward for practicing all week long and getting well prepared," explained Wistrom. He is, however, mature enough to see the value of getting other players involved, especially when the opportunity presents itself. "I think it's only natural that the great players feel cheated when we don't play all 60 minutes, but we definitely understand what has to be done for the good of the program and that is to let the younger players and the backups play."

Added Peter, "The reserves today are the future starters of

tomorrow and next year. They are the players that have to keep this Big Red machine rolling and having them learn when there is a big cushion as opposed to when the game is on the line makes a lot of sense to me.”

The Baylor game proved to be a perfect example of what Peter was implying. The Husker reserves scored only seven points in the second half, while giving up two fourth-quarter touchdowns, making Nebraska’s fifth victory of the season a 49-21 final. Coach Osborne expressed some concern about the effort and intensity of the second- and third-string players. Recalled Peter, “Basically, Coach was sending the message that if given the opportunity to play, you have to be ready for the challenge. It is important for the second- and third-team guys to be able to come in with the same intensity to make sure we don’t skip a beat.”

Some reserves who began to emerge and were making names for themselves included true freshman cornerback Erwin Swiney and sophomore linebacker Tony Ortiz. Swiney recorded his first collegiate interception against the Bears at a critical point of the game and Ortiz led the Husker Blackshirts with five tackles and recovered a fumble. “Erwin and Tony seem to be getting more and more confident with each game. They both have made the most of their opportunities to play and I feel comfortable going to war with them on our side,” expressed Peter.

Peter and best buddy Wistrom created a fair share of disruption and havoc for the Baylor offense, but circumstances prevented either from big individual games. Peter and Wistrom each had two tackles. Said Peter, “There are going to be a certain number of games when you don’t get your usual seven tackles and two sacks. That doesn’t mean guys like Grant and I aren’t playing well. When you are not getting consistent repetitions, it takes longer to get into a rhythm and figure out how to master your opponent. It sounds like a cliché but it was said once that ‘individual stats are pretty much meaningless.’ The bottom line is wins and losses, and after Baylor we’re 5-0. I’m glad this one is over and let’s get back to Lincoln.”

Game 6 - Texas Tech Blackshirts Pitch a Shutout Big Red is No. 1

October 18, 1997, the Nebraska Cornhuskers have reached the halfway point of the season ready to take on the Red Raiders of Texas Tech from Lubbock. It was Homecoming in Lincoln, and remembering a hard-fought 24-10 win against Tech in Lubbock in 1996 and the fact that four-year starter Zebbie Lethridge was at the helm, expectations were for a tough game.

"We were primarily concerned with Zebbie's running ability. We felt like he would be the main weapon for us to stop," reflected Peter. "Last year they had Byron Hanspard as a big-time player; however, this year we felt Lethridge would probably try to do lots of the damage himself." Midweek, the Huskers heard Lethridge might be hampered by a bad ankle. "We heard reports that Zebbie had a sprained ankle and probably wouldn't be as mobile. We then started to anticipate that he wouldn't scramble as much and might throw more, which certainly made the pass rushers happy and eager," explained Peter.

While Peter, Wistrom, and company were about ready to engage into battle with the Red Raiders, the Husker faithful were basking in the sun packing Memorial Stadium for the 218th consecutive time on this Homecoming Saturday. "No offense," said Wistrom, "Homecoming is more for the sororities, fraternities, and alumni. We are going to have 76,000 in our stadium, Homecoming or not. Sure it's neat for the extra campus involvement throughout the week and school pride; but honestly, most of the players and

coaches look at Homecoming as a longer halftime and that's about it."

Peter, for one, took exception to Wistrom's remarks. "The only thing that could have been memorable about the homecoming festivities is that if I ran for royalty, with my good looks, I would have been the favorite for king," joked Peter.

There was no joking on the field, especially for the Husker Blackshirts who were all business. Lethridge and the Red Raiders were held scoreless during the first half and Nebraska took a 13-0 lead into the locker room. At halftime, recalled Wistrom, Coach McBride was quite pleased and issued a challenge. "Coach McBride always stresses how a score or game like this would be an opportunity for the defense. His message was, the offense has put up enough points to win, and now it's our job to finish the game by not giving anything up." Conversely, Peter recalled that Coach Osborne was less than happy with the offensive production and was looking for more in the second half. The Husker offense, aided by a third-quarter Jon Zatechka touchdown fumble recovery, would muster up only 16 more points and the Blackshirts managed to preserve the shutout producing a 29-0 Nebraska victory.

Perhaps the rest of the story was a game taking place at the same time in Happy Valley, Pennsylvania, where the top-ranked Penn State Nittany Lions were playing host to the Minnesota Golden Gophers, eking out a less than impressive 16-15 victory. Contrary to popular belief, some coaches and many players pay attention to the score updates of games around the country provided throughout the game. The Huskers' shutout, Peter thought, might impress the pollsters. Apparently the shutout did help as the 6-0 Huskers would get the good news they were hoping for the following day—being named the top college football team in the country.

Wistrom was surprised. "I knew we would pick up some first-place votes, but didn't think we would take over the top spot. I was definitely happy about the jump, especially knowing that we wouldn't have a chance to play the team (Penn State) that was in

front of us. We were now in a position to control our own destiny and didn't have to hope for certain things to happen in other games," explained Wistrom.

Homecoming weekend proved to be a memorable one for the Huskers. No, Peter didn't win royalty, but the team did regain what they lost in 1996—the No. 1 ranking in the country. Reflected Peter, "The thing that sticks out most in my mind about the Texas Tech game was the shutout. It meant a great deal to me."

Wistrom agreed, "Shutouts are really tough to come by. Let's face it, you can play a great defensive game, but every team gets lucky now and then and might get on the scoreboard at some point. When you can play 60 minutes and not let the other team in your end zone, your defense is making a defining statement. Going into the season, we felt the defense had the potential for several shutouts and the fact that all units maintained intensity for the entire game without any major breakdowns was very encouraging."

Added Peter, "The defense felt like the key part of the game. The Blackshirts were happy to step up and I'm sure there will be a game down the road when the offense might have to carry the load."

Next up, the top-ranked Cornhuskers would go on the road to play the Kansas Jayhawks during a night game televised by the Fox Sports Network.

Game 7 - Kansas Weak, Wet, and Wild

The Nebraska Cornhuskers, fresh off their shutout victory over Texas Tech, were now prepared to take their No. 1 ranking to Lawrence, Kansas, for game number seven of the season against the Kansas Jayhawks. According to Wistrom, even though not much was said about being on top of the college football world, there was a different aura in the air. "Through hard work and dedication we fought to get back what we lost and I could sense some extra pride and confidence in the team," summarized Wistrom.

Added Peter, "This team has always felt like we were worthy of the No. 1 ranking, especially after the Washington win. Since the start of spring ball to the present, the team has always carried themselves as if we were the best team in college football. Basically, the No. 1 ranking just reinforced the potential the team has and jolted our confidence up a degree or two. Probably the fans were now walking around with a little extra swagger, taking pride in the fact that the Huskers were No. 1."

Based upon Penn State losing the No. 1 ranking as a result of a narrow victory, some added pressure was felt by some of the Huskers. Recalled Wistrom, "Not much was ever said but we're all smart enough to know that we have to win big and look good while doing it in order to avoid losing our position in the polls." Almost always a heavy favorite, the Huskers can't help but take notice of the point spread established by the so-called experts and oddsmakers.

"Actually, I think we are very aware of the expected margin of

victory before the game, but when you're out on the field, you forget about the spread, take care of your job and let the chips fall where they may," continued Wistrom. "After that first hit, the only thing that matters is execution. It all comes down to who is the better-prepared team and which team came ready to play."

Early in the week of the Kansas game, there was some speculation that co-captain defensive tackle Peter would not be ready to play against the Jayhawks. On Tuesday, October 21, just four days before Nebraska would take on the Jayhawks, Peter came down with tonsillitis. "I've never had my tonsils removed and the doctors told me that at my age (23), the recovery time would be about 7 to 10 days if I went ahead and had them taken out. Obviously, at this point in the season, I wasn't prepared to do that and was just hoping to get enough strength back by the weekend to be effective in the game," remembered Peter.

Peter, who is universally known as one of the hardest working players in Nebraska football history and someone who has a hard time relaxing, had to get accustomed to a different lifestyle for a few days as a result of his illness. Recalls Peter, "Basically from Tuesday to Friday morning, I experienced the life of one of my roommates, Brian Nunns." Nunns is a former Husker who was a member of the back-to-back national championship teams and has been a close friend of both Christian and Jason Peter. "For the most part, as best as I can figure it, Nunns' typical day consisted of soap operas, Oprah, and eating bonbons. I experienced it all, except the bonbons because I couldn't eat or keep any food down. It was really a sleeping contest for 48-plus hours and Nunns beat me at that because I was getting up about every three hours to take medication," concluded Peter.

Despite his illness, Peter never for a moment doubted that he would play against Kansas. "I always knew I would play," Peter said. "I did feel very weak when playing against Kansas, mainly because I hadn't eaten for several days and my muscles were very fatigued."

Like Peter, Wistrom was certain his best buddy would be ready come kickoff. "Hey, this guy is a junkyard dog! It's going to take more than a little bout with tonsillitis to hold Jason back," said Wistrom.

With Peter being less than full strength and starting defensive tackle Jason Wiltz being sidelined as a result of a one-game suspension, some might expect the Blackshirts to be vulnerable against Kansas.

Prior to kickoff on a rain-soaked, blustery evening, the Husker captains came up with several ways to motivate the team. The obvious source of motivation was protecting, if not enhancing, the No. 1 ranking. "We brought up the 1993 season when Nebraska escaped Lawrence with a 21-20 victory as Kansas missed a two-point conversion which ultimately kept Nebraska's national championship hopes alive," said Wistrom. "As the coaches told it, Nebraska had several opportunities to put the game away early and never did, always keeping KU's bid for an upset alive. Our message was, they don't belong on the same field as us and let's be decisive about how we put them away."

Peter also asked the team to visualize Nebraska's impressive 41-3 victory the last time Nebraska played at Memorial Stadium in Lawrence. "I reminded the team that we dominated Kansas in every phase of the game and that we put on a show for a stadium more than half full of Husker faithful. I told them we expect the same tonight!"

Very little proved to be spectacular about the Nebraska vs. Kansas game; however, some unusual moments did take place during Nebraska's solid business-like 35-0 victory over Kansas. Ahead 7-0 in the first quarter, Nebraska was forced to punt when Kansas defender Jason Harris came through clean and blocked the punt. Husker fullback Joel Makovicka scooped up the loose ball and scampered some 38 yards to keep the Nebraska drive alive. Wistrom singles that play as the backbreaker for Kansas. "If they recover the ball and take it in for a score, it's a tie ballgame. They have the momentum and the home crowd is in the game. We eventually were able to get up 21-0 and gradually keep pulling away. In my opinion, Makovicka's heads-up play was definitely the play of the game," remembered Wistrom.

The bizarre events were just beginning in Lawrence on a night when only the dedicated Husker fans would opt to cheer on the

Huskers in person as opposed to watching the tube. With just over nine minutes remaining in the second quarter, nearly half of the lights went out in KU's Memorial Stadium. "My immediate reaction was, 'Let's keep the game going.' I mean it was freezing out there and I didn't want a major delay in the game. The lights were on good enough to where you could see to play the game," recalled Wistrom. "We suspected that Kansas Coach Terry Allen might lobby for a delay in order to throw our rhythm off. Thankfully, he didn't and we started in after only a couple-minute delay," said Peter.

Despite the Nebraska offense being able to grind up nearly 400 yards on the ground and 35 total points in less than ideal weather conditions, the Blackshirts were dominant and clearly the stars of the game. "It appeared the offense was a little bit sluggish that night and not hitting on all cylinders. I remember at halftime, Coach Osborne stressed execution to the offense; and McBride challenged the defense to maintain the intensity and finish off our second consecutive shutout," said Peter.

Peter, Wistrom, and the Blackshirts responded to McBride's challenge and preserved the shutout in fine fashion. The Jayhawks were held to only 48 total yards by game's end, marking the fifth best defensive performance in Nebraska Blackshirt history. "All things considered, I was very happy with the way the defense showed up. Kansas didn't get a first down until the second half and just couldn't get anything going the entire night. It was a total Blackshirt effort with the defensive line, the backers, and the secondary all playing like champions in adverse conditions," remarked Peter.

Tonsillitis and all, Peter was up for the challenge, recording five total tackles while All-American rush end Wistrom figured in on four total tackles and one personal foul. "I was highly upset about the personal foul call and 15-yard penalty," said Wistrom. "Their quarterback threw the ball out in the flat to a running back and I took off hoping to get in on the play. I saw one of our guys take the back but could clearly see the player's knees never hit the ground. The KU back obviously felt the same way as he got up and tried to

continue with the run before I leveled him." Continued Wistrom, "I think Ultimate Warrior from the World Wrestling Federation would have been very proud as I pulled the belly-to-back on him. Unfortunately, the referee wasn't too impressed and didn't see things unfold the same way I did."

Said Wistrom, "None of the coaches really got on me after the personal foul because they could tell I was playing hard and aggressive." There are times, however, when Osborne will yank a player for a flagrant personal foul. "If we get flagged for throwing a punch or talking trash, Coach will pull you aside, let you cool down, and have you think about your mistake. All in all, my aggressive play was very reflective of the way the entire defense showed up that night. I was very proud of our effort and eager to get home."

Unfortunately for Wistrom, his teammates, and all of the Husker followers, an early and severe winter storm was in full force back in Nebraska and throughout parts of Kansas. The Husker team traveled by bus to Lawrence, and due to the night game, arrangements had been made for a charter flight back to Lincoln. Recalled Wistrom, "From taking off in a driving rain in Topeka to landing on snow and ice in Lincoln, it was somewhat of a nerve-wracking flight. Upon getting off the plane in late October with such depressing weather conditions, I jokingly asked myself exactly why I decided not to attend the University of Miami."

The Peter-Wistrom residence would ultimately prove to be one of thousands of homes throughout southeast Nebraska that would be without power for multiple days. "We were without power for three full days and that created some awkward situations," reflected Peter. "Seeking warmth from his frozen waterbed, Grant asked if he could sleep with me. After looking at Grant and living with him several years, I quickly knew that he wasn't my type," laughed the good-natured Peter.

Wistrom has a different perspective on the night the lights went out both in Lawrence and in Lincoln. "Truth of the matter is, Jason's girlfriend couldn't come over that night. Also, being without power, Jason was unable to have his night light on. Jason hates to sleep by

himself in the dark, so he asked me if I'd join him. I said, 'Really, Jason, we're good friends and all, we do a lot on and off the field together, but I do have my pride and good name,'" Wistrom joked.

All kidding aside, Peter, Wistrom, and the Huskers would quickly have to redirect their focus from power outages, tree damage, snow removal, and storm cleanup to getting prepared for arch-rival Oklahoma Sooners.

Game 8 - Oklahoma One for the Record Books

Early on in the season, co-captain Jason Peter acknowledged some sleepless nights trying to come up with motivational material to use in the locker room prior to the Huskers taking the field. Peter and the other captains wouldn't have to search far to find subplots or story lines prior to the annual Nebraska-Oklahoma clash. For starters, the 71 consecutive game series, dating all the way back to 1928, will take a two-year hiatus until the year 2000 and Nebraska wanted to close out the series in style with an impressive win. Equally important, a Nebraska victory would produce Coach Tom Osborne's 250th career win in his 25 years of head coaching at Nebraska. With a victory, Osborne would become the first coach in the history of college football to reach the 250-victory plateau in just 25 years. And, of course, the Huskers wanted another impressive televised victory to solidify their No. 1 ranking.

"Let's face it, even though I don't know much about the history of the rivalry, Nebraska vs. Oklahoma is widely known as one of the richest rivalries in all of sports," said Peter. "We were happy to have the chance to play them in our senior year, yet saddened the rivalry was temporarily put on hold."

Although Peter and Wistrom would now become part of Husker history and trivia as two players participating in the tradition-rich classic, neither had much recollection, if any, of earlier Nebraska-Oklahoma battles. "Honestly, I have no recollections of Nebraska vs. Oklahoma before coming to Lincoln. I didn't even

know who was good in college football until my senior year of high school," said Peter.

Wistrom was likewise clueless in what many Nebraskan's consider to be Husker household names. "I had never heard of names like Jeff Kinney, Rich Glover, Jerry Tagge, and Johnny "The Jet" Rodgers. Those names were all foreign to me until I saw all of the trophies and memorabilia in the West Stadium," admitted Wistrom.

Despite thrashing the Sooners in Norman 73-21 one year ago and the fact that the Sooners were bringing a 3-5 record to Lincoln, expectations were for a difficult game. "With the exception of 1996, Oklahoma always plays Nebraska tough and we felt this game would be no different." Continued Wistrom, "We knew being ranked No. 1 that we would get Oklahoma's best effort, and that once again we would have to win impressively to remain No. 1."

The primary motivation to play well against Oklahoma was clearly for the man who is synonymous with Nebraska football. "Two hundred fifty for T.O. was all that needed to be said to the team," recalled Peter. "For the past 25 years, there hasn't been a more consistent or more successful coach in the country."

Added Wistrom, "He is the most loyal, honest, and dedicated coach in the country; and our goal was to win this game impressively in his honor. All game days are important to Coach Osborne, but we knew this one was especially important to him. Not only did we not want to let him down, but we wanted to represent the previous 24 Nebraska football teams as best as possible. I'm sure most, if not all, of his former players would be glued to the television to see Coach Osborne go for the milestone."

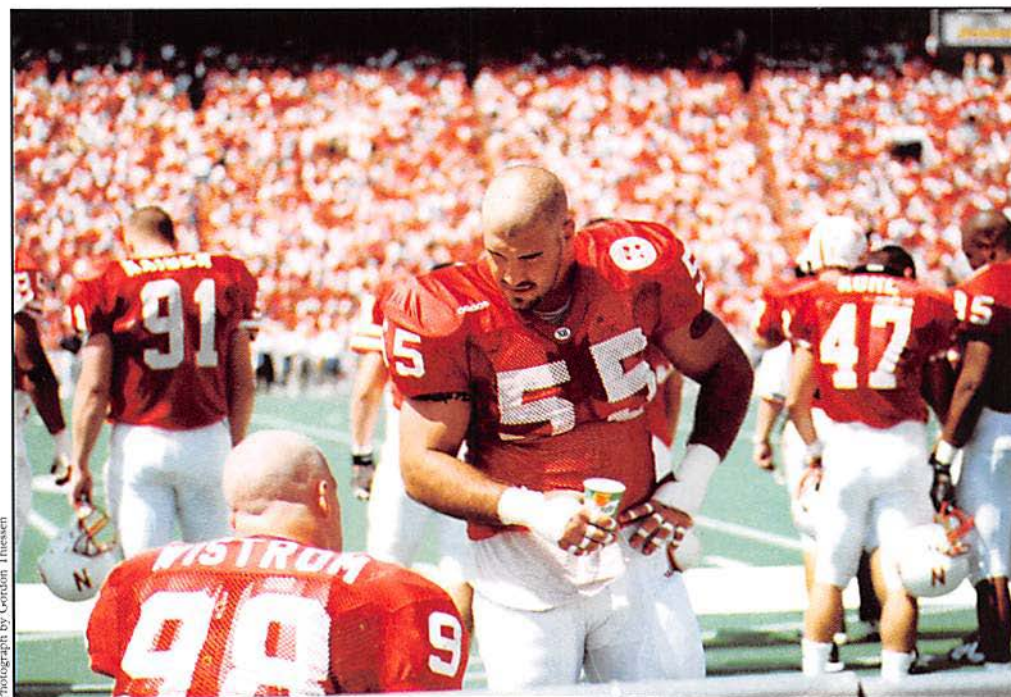
As one might predict, Peter recalls how Osborne downplayed the significance of the Oklahoma game and redirected the credit to his players. "Before the game, Coach Osborne made mention that the press would try to make a big deal about the 250 milestone and he indicated that all the credit goes to the players."

In front of an ABC regional television audience and Nebraska's 219th consecutive sellout at Memorial Stadium, history was made





Many regard Wistrom (98) and Peter (55)
as the heart and soul of the 1997 Championship team!



Best friends, Wistrom and Peter were known as the ultimate "team players."



Husker faithful were glad to see Wistrom return for his senior season.

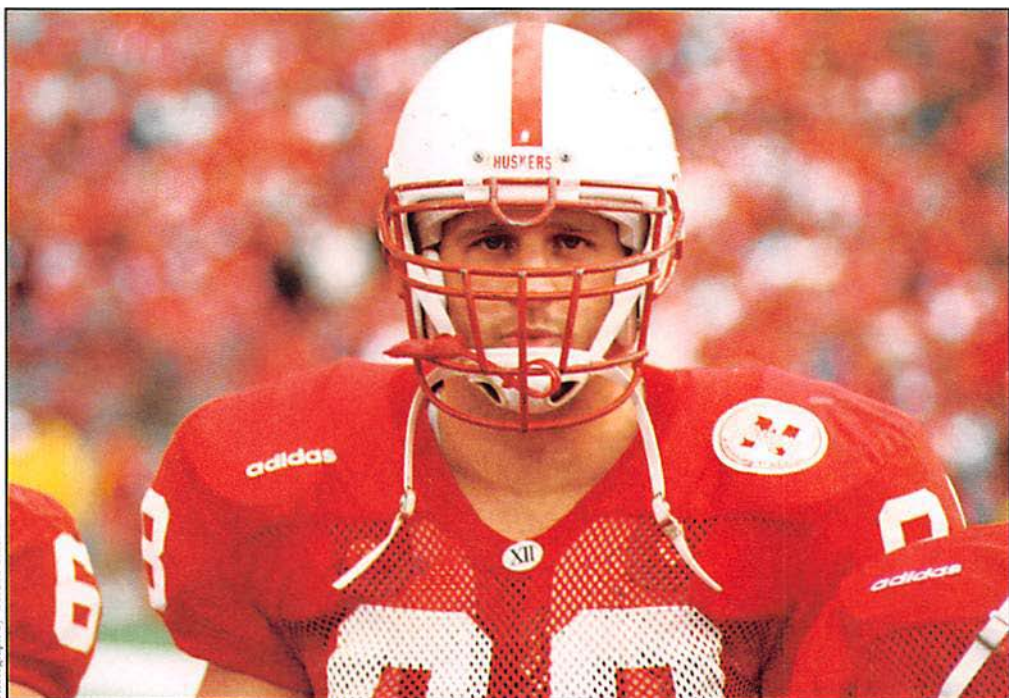
Peter paid tribute to older brother Christian by switching from No. 95 to No. 55.



Together, Wistrom and Peter consistently demonstrated loyalty toward each other and their fellow teammates.



With or without his helmet, Peter (55) never gave less than 100 percent effort.



Wistrom always came to play with his game face on!



Peter's score in the 1996 Orange Bowl helped Nebraska close out the season in style and it set the tone for the 1997 national championship season.



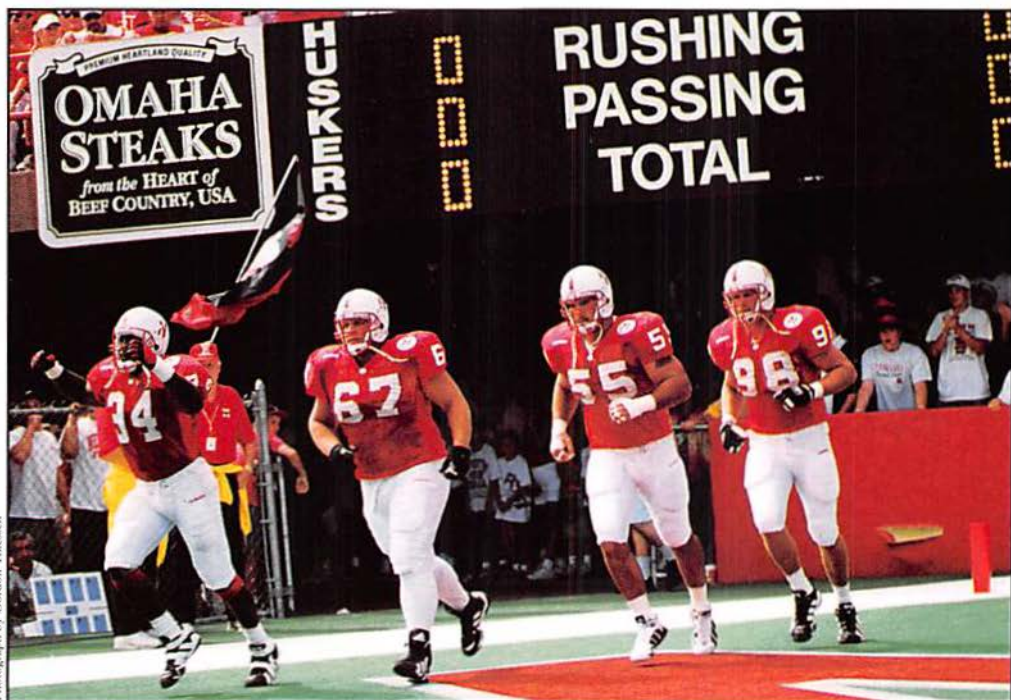
Opponents were often forced to run away from the fearsome twosome.



Wistrom (98) and Central Florida's Culpepper (8) will probably meet again in the NFL.



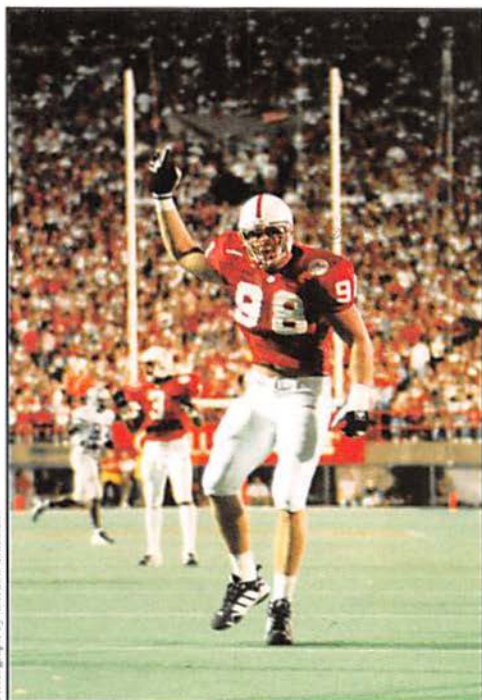
Against Central Florida, Peter was fearful of a career-ending injury.



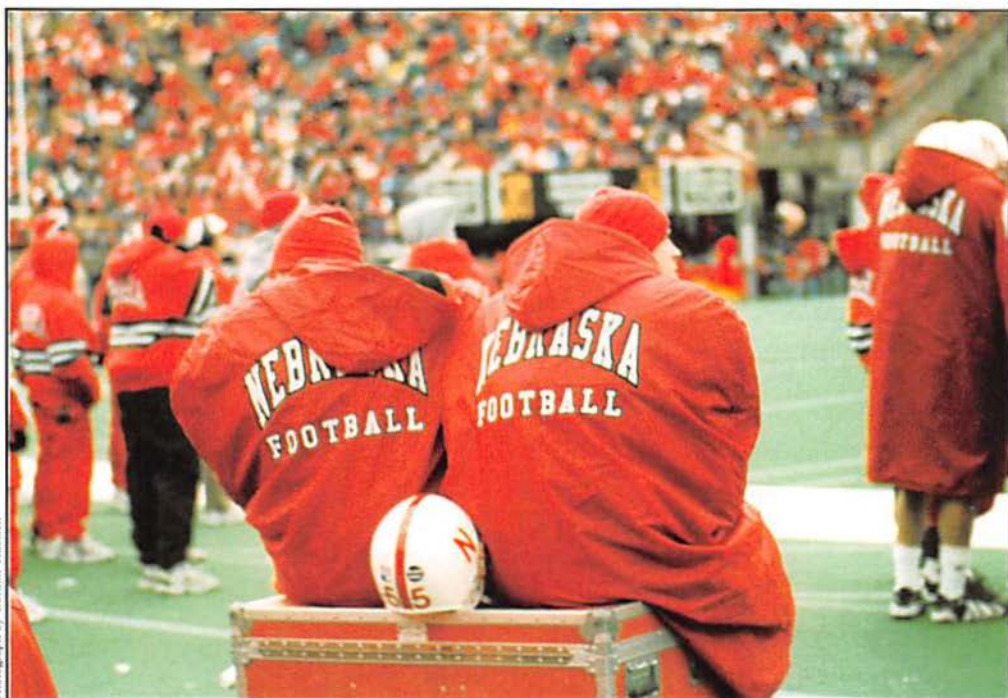
Vershan Jackson (34) and Aaron Taylor (67) were elected as 1997 team captains along with emotional leaders Peter and Wistrom.



Scott Frost and the Husker offensive line simply wore teams down while marching to a 13-0 season.



Wistrom and Peter loved playing to the crowd!



Wistrom and Peter were inseparable during 1997. They shared a national championship title and lasting memories.

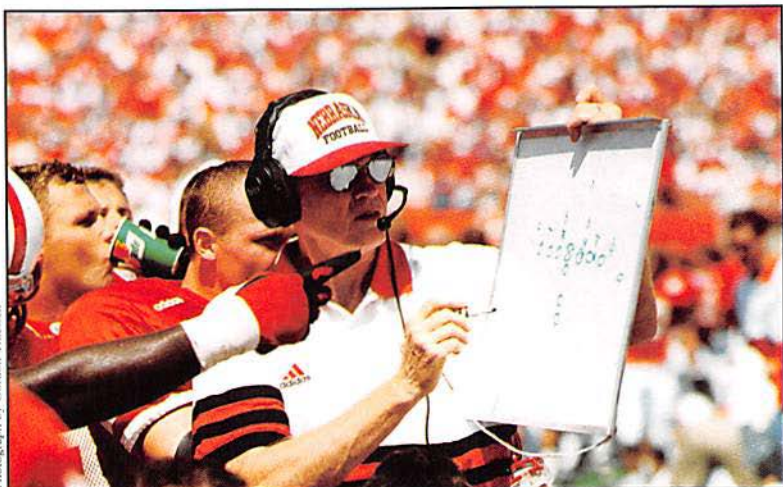


Poised for action.

Despite constantly being double-teamed, Peter found a way to make the big plays!



Wistrom and Peter knew just how long to celebrate, breaking it up before drawing a penalty.

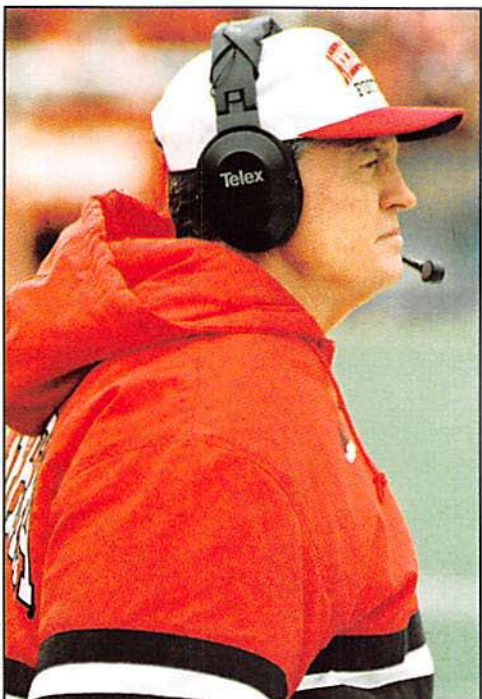


Coach Tom Osborne taught more than the X's and O's, he also taught the "game of life."

Veterans like Wistrom and Peter were impressed with the athletic ability and composure of true freshman Bobby Newcombe.



Freshman Matt Davison became a true Husker hero with catches like this one and especially the amazing "Flea Kicker" grab at Missouri.



Wistrom and Peter felt honored to play for the legendary Dr. Tom Osborne.



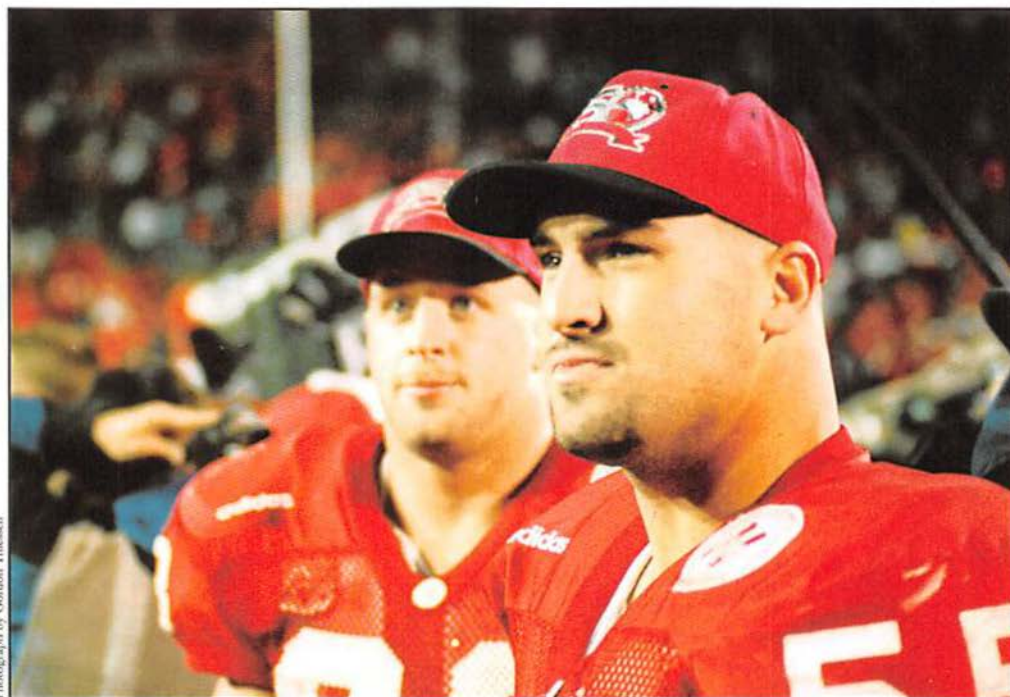
Scott Frost (7) and Joel Makovicka (45) were key players in the drive for No. 1.



Wistrom and Peter were determined to send Coach Osborne out with another national title.



Wistrom shares an emotional moment with "father figure" Coach Tom Osborne prior to his final home game.

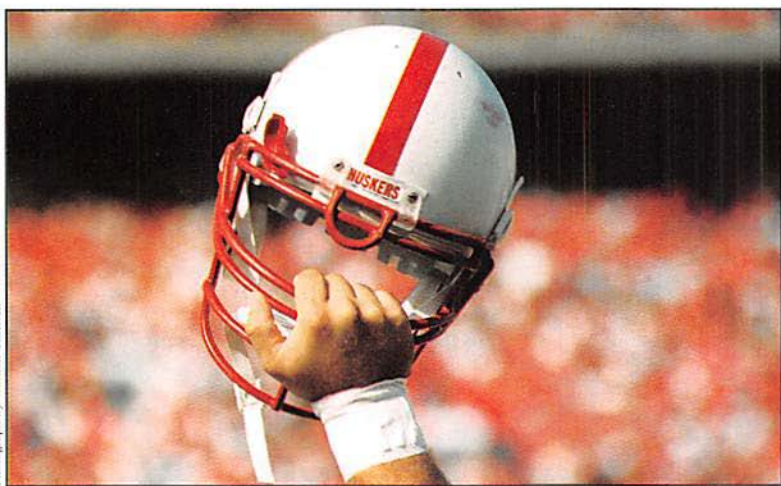


Little did Wistrom and Peter know at the time, their final season would also be Coach Osborne's last.



Wistrom came close several times to sacking future NFL star Peyton Manning.

By season's end quarterback Scott Frost earned the respect of players and fans alike.

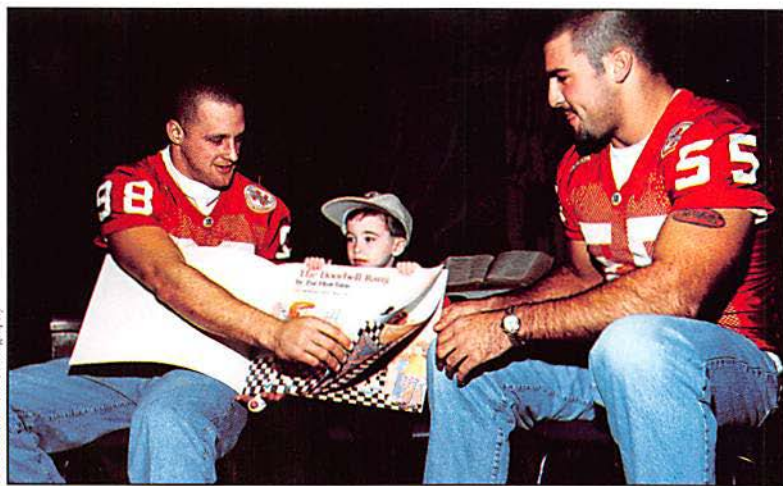
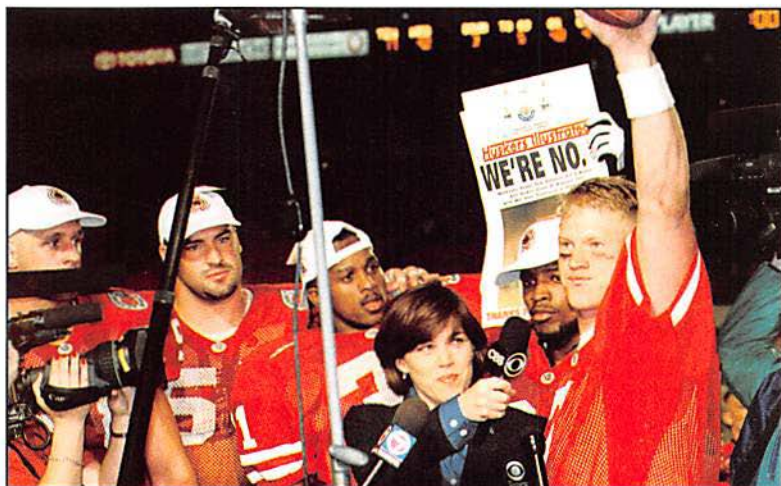


Peter went 60-3 and Wistrom went 49-2 during their respective careers each claiming three national championship rings with the Huskers.

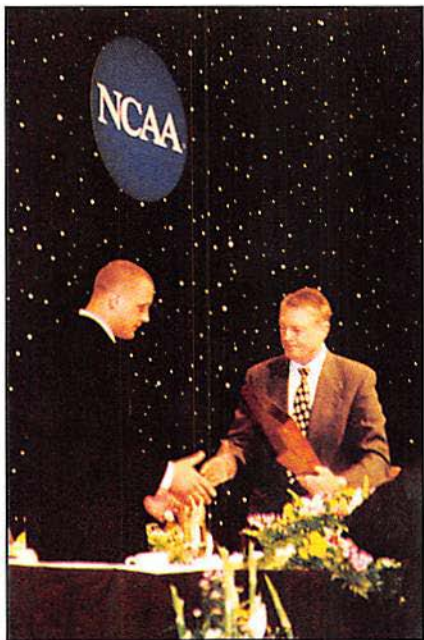


Wistrom and Peter share in the 1998 Orange Bowl celebration with Coach Osborne.

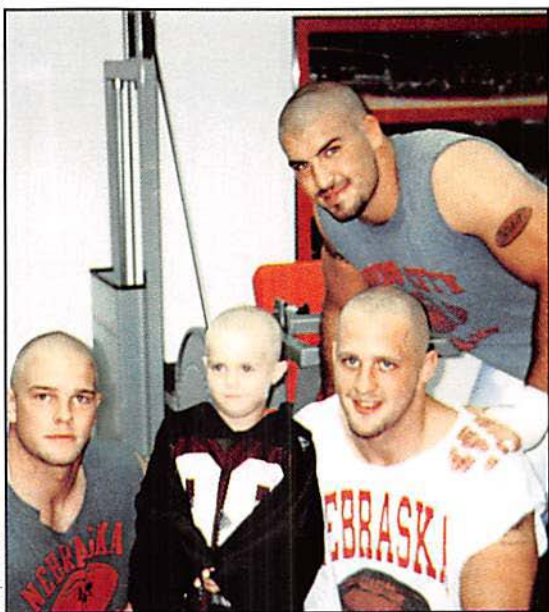
Scott Frost made his point both on and off the field helping lead the Huskers to a share of the 1997 national title.



Wistrom and Peter were also community leaders. Here they volunteered as "celebrity readers" at First Plymouth Pre-school and Discovery Days.

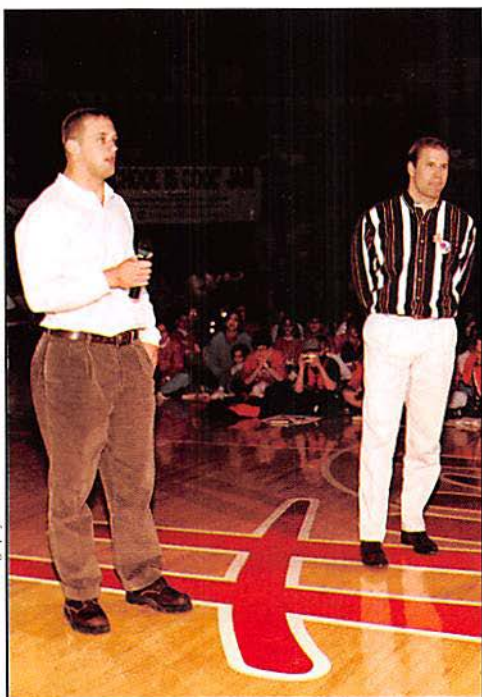


Coach Osborne congratulates Grant Wistrom as one of the Top-Eight student-athletes in the NCAA in 1997.

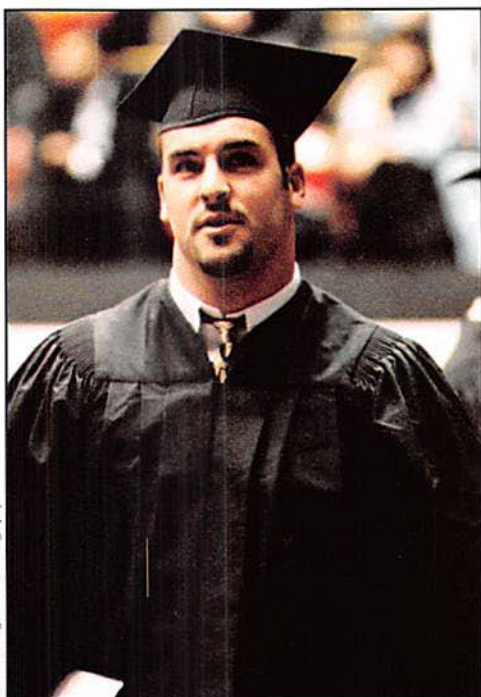


Larry Chalmers

Blackshirts, Peter, Tomich and Wistrom share a special moment with courageous Kendall Chalmers.



Wistrom joined former Husker Trev Alberts as a speaker at the "School is Cool" Jam.



Richard Wright UNI Photography

Although Jason received many awards on the gridiron, his proudest moment was college graduation in December 1997.



Photograph by Gordon Thiessen

on November 1, 1997. Nebraska put together perhaps its most dominant win of the season with a 69-7 blasting of Oklahoma, giving Coach Osborne his 250th victory in his decorated 25 years of Nebraska coaching tenure. "We didn't want to let Coach Osborne down," exclaimed Wistrom. "He'll be the first guy to downplay the significance of 250 wins and give credit to everyone else. We all know who got the program to this level, and we'd give our heart and soul to the man."

Those witnessing the historic Nebraska-Oklahoma game would all agree that Wistrom indeed gave his soul to Coach Osborne and the Husker program on that cold, breezy November day. Wistrom had a breakthrough game making 10 tackles, four of which resulted in minus-23 yards for the group formerly known as Sooner Magic. Oh, by the way, Wistrom had two sacks, caused three fumbles, and recovered one. Peter responded to Wistrom's performance by saying, "The General came to play and was all over the field against Oklahoma. I would hope the guy would have a huge game while I was getting double- and triple-teamed all day," joked Peter. "Seriously, Grant was a terror out there and proved he is one of the best college football players in the nation."

Wistrom made these comments about his inspirational play. "For some reason Oklahoma made the decision to try and block me with a running back on pass plays and that's how I ended up with two of my sacks. The fumbles that I caused were a case of being in the right place at the right time. One was on a pitch where I timed it perfectly and I batted the ball away. The other one, Daniels (Oklahoma quarterback) cut back and came right into me, so I got a hard, clean shot on him, causing the fumble. The third fumble, I got the quarterback from behind and brought both arms down hard on the ball, jarring it loose. I saw the ball laying there and found a way to get up and recover the ball," analyzed Wistrom. Despite such a big game on such a special day, Wistrom was still his hardest critic. "Statistically, I had a pretty good game, but after going back and watching the films, I blew a lot of plays that I should have made. I realistically should have had four to five more tackles and another sack if I did everything right."

Wistrom, a preseason all-everything and candidate for all major national awards, made a statement to the rest of the country that he is worthy of serious consideration for National Defensive Player of the Year and Lombardi Award honors. "Obviously, it was nice to have a game like that. The main goal is for the team to win. If the team is winning and the individual honors are coming . . . well, then that's even better. The main concern is for the team to continue improving and winning, staying on course for the national championship," summarized Wistrom.

Whereas Wistrom was proud of his individual performance, he was excited about the effort of his fellow Blackshirts. "It was our most complete defensive effort. Oklahoma hit a long pass on their touchdown drive, and without that play, we probably notch our third straight shutout," added Wistrom. "I would rank the Oklahoma game as one of the best defensive efforts during my entire four-year career. We were really on them all day and deserved to have the shutout!"

Much like Wistrom, Peter made his presence known before, during, and after the game. After giving the final pregame motivational talk, Peter went out and made six tackles, including one sack for minus-4 yards and even recovered a fumble. When the reserves took over and Peter could tell the game was no longer in doubt, his attention focused on the postgame celebration recognizing Coach Osborne's 250th victory.

"On Thursday before the game, Sports Information Director Chris Anderson told me they wanted me to present the game ball and give a brief speech on behalf of the team, assuming we won the game. Chris gave me an outline on things to include in the talk. I tried to memorize that version for a while and I quickly made the administrative decision to edit her talk into the bare necessities. Hey, I had too much to worry about with the game and couldn't stress out about memorizing a thesis," recalled Peter.

The night before the game, picture if you will, the 6-foot-5, 285-pound Peter in front of a mirror in his room at the Nebraska Center team hotel. "I was looking in the mirror rehearsing several times,

‘Coach, on behalf of the 25 football teams that you have coached, the 1997 Nebraska football team would like to thank you and congratulate you on your 250th victory,’ said Peter. ‘I stumbled and stuttered through the message three to four times and then finally put it to rest hoping it would all come out okay.’

Peter, a communication studies major, was hoping the game would be well in hand before the end of the game, giving him ample opportunity for a final rehearsal of what seemed like the State of the Union Address. ‘I was worried if it was a fourth-quarter game with us winning and then was forced straight into the presentation, I wouldn’t do as well as I wanted. But fortunately, the game was well under control and I spent most of the fourth quarter on the sidelines grabbing teammates asking them to critique my speech,’ remembered Peter.

Peter, being the gamer and prime-time performer that he is, came through in fine fashion eloquently congratulating Coach Osborne and presenting him with the historic game ball. Chilled and standing on the field, a fireworks display immediately followed.

‘Coach Osborne would have been content with a congratulations in the locker room from the team and then begin preparing for Missouri. My opinion was that Coach Osborne deserved something as grand as a fireworks display. He has meant so much to the program, to the state of Nebraska, and all of the players who have put on the scarlet and cream. Coach truly deserved something spectacular!’ summarized Wistrom.

In their second to last home game in Memorial Stadium, a changing of the guard was beginning to take place. After just a few more games, Peter and Wistrom would no longer be the current stars of the Husker team. New names like Bobby Newcombe and Clint Finley would begin to emerge as household names. Newcombe made at least three spectacular plays, including a 40-yard touchdown reception, a dazzling punt return to set up another score, and an acrobatic, spinning, one-handed grab along the sidelines. ‘The kid is just a great athlete. What the fans saw in the Oklahoma game—trust me, there is more to come. I’m impressed

with his poise and focus for a true freshman. People should have high expectations for Bobby and I'm sure he won't disappoint," said Peter. Regarding backup safety Clint Finley, Peter added, "He's flat-out a great football player who knows the game. It also happens to be that he tries to knock you out on every hit. I wouldn't say he is a dirty player; he is just doing his job which is to make his presence felt."

Peter and Wistrom have certainly made their presence known during their entire Nebraska careers. After the Nebraska-Oklahoma game, the two would celebrate their careers with family, friends, and staff enjoying their Senior Day celebration and banquet. "Early on in the season when we picked the Oklahoma game and reserved the facilities, we didn't even think about the game possibly being Coach Osborne's 250th win," said Peter.

"It definitely made our Senior Day more special and memorable. Let's face it, November 1, 1997, was a day I won't soon forget," said the emotional Wistrom. "It was great to have family, faculty, and friends to help me celebrate a great Nebraska experience.

"For the first time, reality was beginning to settle in that I would play just one more game in Memorial Stadium and that really kind of shook me up," Wistrom said. "Nebraska had been home to me for four years and pretty soon it's going to be gone and never to be had again and that saddens me. There are lots of special memories in Lincoln that shortly I will be walking away from."

Senior Day banquet for Peter was also a time for celebration and reflection. "It seems like just yesterday, I was a freshman and I'm so thankful that I followed my brother Christian to Nebraska. I just wish Damian would have had the chance to line up next to me, much the same way I did with Christian," stressed Peter. There was no shortage of emotional speeches and compliments during Peter and Wistrom's special night.

Perhaps the highest praise was distributed by Nebraska's defensive coordinator, Charlie McBride. McBride decisively told the capacity crowd that Peter and Wistrom were without question the two best defensive players he has ever coached. "That was special,"

said Peter. "Coach McBride isn't one to throw out compliments unless they are deserved. Danny Noonan, Neil Smith, Trev Alberts, and the list goes on and on—to be mentioned as one of the best among the best at Nebraska means more to me than being named to any All-American team." McBride was adamant in referring to Peter and Wistrom as two true football warriors and heroes; but if you were to ask Wistrom about heroes, he would without question mention the name Kendall Chalmers.

"I met Kendall during my junior year and learned that this six-year-old boy from Missouri had leukemia. Due to chemotherapy, Kendall was going to lose all of his hair. Through the help of my dad, arrangements were made to have Kendall attend the 1996 Nebraska-Missouri game. After the game, he came into the varsity locker room and Jason, Jared Tomich, and I all shaved our heads along with Kendall. I gave him one of my Blackshirts and told him now that he is a Blackshirt, he would have to be tough and brave and shave his head throughout the year," recalled Wistrom.

Wistrom was very moved and honored to have Kendall and his family attend his senior celebration. "It was neat that he could attend. He presented me with a framed picture back when we had our heads shaved," recalled Wistrom. "It just kind of hit me when I was about ready to start my comments that everyone thinks players like Jason and I are almost super-like heroes. People assume that we are so big and tough and can emotionally handle any circumstance. Guys like Jason and me are 22 and 23 years old and have a choice if we want to play football or not. Kendall didn't have a choice about leukemia and his body was experiencing a tremendous amount of pain that most can't even begin to imagine. Kendall helps me keep everything in perspective, especially when I feel sorry for myself." Last season, in 1996, Wistrom placed two sets of initials on the back of his helmet as a source of inspiration to others. "I had the initials K.C. for Kendall Chambers and also M.U. for a young girl who I knew that died. Their stories and their positive attitudes have always kept me grounded into reality and determined to work hard, always giving 110 percent."

The so-called football experts were almost certain that Wistrom and company wouldn't need to exert 110 percent effort when traveling to Columbia, Missouri, for their next game to take on the much-improved Missouri Tigers.

Game 9 - Missouri Nebraska, A Team of Destiny!

After Tom Osborne's historic 250th victory over Oklahoma, the Huskers would begin preparations for what many expected to be another ho-hum, business-as-usual victory. Despite Missouri coming off consecutive victories over Texas, Oklahoma State, and Colorado, many were convinced the top-ranked Huskers would have few, if any, problems against the Missouri Tigers in Columbia.

Contrary to the media and fan's perceptions of the Missouri game, Huskers like Jason Peter thought all along that the Tigers would present a challenge. "Going into the game, many of the players really felt like this game could be the one that sneaks up on us. We definitely were not going to take Missouri lightly. We knew they were talented with a very good quarterback in Corby Jones. Missouri was riding a three-game winning streak over tough teams, so obviously they would be confident that they could beat Nebraska as well," summarized Peter.

Unfortunately, in Peter's opinion, Nebraska didn't practice well leading up to the Missouri game. "It was a tough week of practice. Guys were getting fatigued and it really couldn't have come at a worse time with such a tough game ahead of us."

Added Wistrom, "We hadn't had any time off and I think some of the guys were going through the ninth-week blues. It just seemed like there were lots of factors that impacted our preparations from daylight-savings time to mid-terms, and from my perspective, it seemed like the focus, enthusiasm, energy, and execution, that usually are a given, weren't taking place."

Also, heading into the ninth week of the season, several players begin to get banged up and have a variety of bumps and bruises. Wistrom, for one, missed Monday's practice after the Oklahoma victory. Said Peter, "Pumpkin sat out because of a scrape or something on his knee!"

"The 'something,'" chimed Wistrom, "was a very sore, right knee. I hurt my right knee in the Kansas game, but being the banger I am, I toughed it out during the Oklahoma week; and during the OU game, things finally caught up with me." Wistrom had aggravated his right knee against the Sooners, causing swelling and fluid buildup. Wistrom returned on Tuesday and then on Friday before the Missouri game, his right knee was drained. According to Wistrom, this was not a significant injury. "Basically it's just a matter of draining the knee, resting it, and icing it. I was just hoping the knee didn't get hit too much during the game and swell up on me."

It would take far more than a swollen knee to keep the "General" Grant Wistrom from playing in his homecoming of sorts. "I was definitely looking forward to the trip back to Missouri. Earlier in the week, I had talked with some friends back home and they told me that Missouri was very fired up and focused on the game. I was also excited because I knew it was another televised game and they were expecting a capacity crowd," said Wistrom. Among the crowd would be many Missourians for Nebraska. "I knew a good portion of Webb City would be at the game and that made me really intent on having a good game and proving to everyone that Nebraska was a good choice for me. I wanted to go out in style." Wistrom and Nebraska would indeed go out in style on the early evening of Saturday, November 8, in front of a 66,000-plus crowd at Faurot Field. Certainly few, if any, would have predicted what was about to unfold.

Throughout the Missouri week and repeatedly on Friday and Saturday, Coach Tom Osborne stressed to his top-ranked Huskers that the Tigers would present a very physical and complete challenge. "Coach Osborne stressed the importance of being prepared for a full game," recalled Peter. "Coach always talks about

GAME 9, MISSOURI-NEBRASKA, A TEAM OF DESTINY / 105

wearing a team down, and at some point, taking over. We truly felt like we would jump on Missouri early, hold them on a couple of series, and then gradually pull away for a decisive victory." Who would blame Peter for such a theory as that is the format for the majority of the Husker victories. On this game day, things didn't go as Peter projected and the Huskers were almost in for more than they bargained for.

November 8 was labeled "Judgment Day" in college football, and few figured the Nebraska-Missouri game would factor into the big picture. Most were focused on Florida State against North Carolina and Michigan vs. Penn State. Headlines prior to kickoff in Columbia were focusing on the return of Wistrom to Missouri and the battle of the Magnificent Sevens, pitting Husker quarterback Scott Frost against Missouri signal-caller Corby Jones. Frost and Jones would prove to be worthy of all pregame hype as both played exceptionally well; however, Wistrom and the Blackshirts struggled throughout the entire game, constantly finding their backs against the wall.

If Missouri's opening drive was an omen, Nebraska should have known they were in for a battle. Corby Jones engineered a 78-yard, 12-play scoring drive capped by a Brock Olivio 1-yard run. "Our coaches were right on the mark. They said Jones is a big, tough kid who is hard to tackle and wrap up. Bottom line is, our tackling was horrendous. We kept them going with our mistakes and lack of discipline. Several times we would have Corby and he would always find a way to break away and kill us for an extra 20 or 30 yards," explained Peter. In a game where Missouri racked up nearly 400 yards of total offense, including 293 yards by Corby Jones himself, the Blackshirts were humbled in a hurry.

"We went from nearly three straight shutouts to not being able to stop a team," said Wistrom. "It was a complete utter feeling of helplessness. It reminded me of the Big 12 Championship game last year against Texas. No matter what we tried, we just couldn't stop Missouri's offense. They just kept taking it to us and I found myself wondering if it would ever end. I felt there would have to be some

point when they misfire and we start clicking and then we pull away, but it just never happened. Missouri had the perfect game plan and capitalized on all of our busts.”

Wistrom was also at a loss for words when it came to Corby Jones. “I just kept thinking Jake Plummer and James Brown. (Plummer directed Arizona State’s 19-0 upset win against Nebraska in 1996 and Brown backed up his talk by leading the Longhorns to the first-ever Big 12 Championship.) Corby reminded me of those two guys as he could do no wrong, and there were more times than not that I thought he was going to lead his team to an upset victory,” explained Wistrom.

Field position and the field itself were two significant factors in the game. “Missouri had a short field to play with almost every series,” said Peter. “They were constantly starting on our side of the 50 and that makes it tough on our defense. We have to play more conservative and can’t go for a blitz, because if we get burned and they get one big play, right away they are within striking distance or in the red zone area.”

Wistrom and Peter also realize that both teams played the game on the same field; however, they firmly believe that the adverse field conditions were more damaging to Nebraska. “There is no polite way to say it, the field was garbage and like playing in a sandbox,” said Wistrom.

Added Peter, “On the first play of the game, I rolled my ankle in a pit, not a divot, and knew the field was as bad as advertised.”

Wistrom believes that both offenses definitely had the advantage as a result of the playing conditions. “Our entire defense is based upon speed. We aren’t the biggest defensive unit in the world. We found ourselves backpedaling the entire game. You would push off on the snap and the turf would just tear beneath you. I remember having to alter my stance and picking up chunks of grass and throwing them out of my way. I really felt I was at a disadvantage because as light as I am at 260 pounds, I need all of the leverage I can get when trying to throw aside 300-plus pounders.”

Despite trailing Missouri 24-21 at the half, Wistrom felt like the

second half would be a chance to correct all wrongs. "During halftime, the coaches were asking what kind of character this team would show the rest of the game. Were we going to dwell on the fact that things didn't go well during the first half or just keep fighting and hoping that eventually the tide would turn?" remembered Wistrom. According to Wistrom, as the game continued and Nebraska could not manage to pull away, losing the game didn't enter his mind until the closing minutes of the game. "For the most part, I just had a feeling that somehow, someway we were going to win the game. Of course I felt that way pretty much through my only two career losses against Arizona State and Texas," said Wistrom.

"I didn't think about losing until our offense punted the ball to Missouri with about three minutes left in the game. I'm not sure why he did it, but Coach Osborne displayed lots of confidence and faith in the defense. We didn't deserve his vote of confidence because nothing that we had done to that point in the game indicated we could hold them and get the ball back," explained Wistrom.

The critical play on Missouri's attempt to run out the clock and seal the victory was a 5-yard illegal substitution call making a 3rd-and-1 now a 3rd-and-6. Recalled Peter, "If they get a first down on 3-and-1, the game is over. But you know, I don't feel bad about them getting the penalty because they were substituting illegally the entire game. When our coach doesn't know who they have in the huddle, that changes a lot of things and makes it hard for us to know what defense to run. Basically, they would have 12 in the huddle and then send one off at the last minute," explained Peter.

Peter credited Jay Foreman for constantly pointing out illegal substitutions to the referees throughout the game. "The ref kept telling Jay, 'Hey, I know and I'll call the next time.' Finally and luckily for us, he called an illegal substitution at a critical point," said Peter. Peter and the Blackshirts held on 3rd-and-6, and after a 17-yard Bobby Newcombe punt return to Nebraska's 33-yard line, the Huskers had 67 yards with 1:02 to go in order to tie the game and preserve any hopes of a national championship.

Recalled Peter, "Basically everything we had worked for since January came down to 62 seconds. Most of the Blackshirts were sitting on the bench during the beginning of 'the drive,' and eventually got up to start watching. The whole time, I was thinking, 'If this one slips away, nobody is to blame but the Blackshirts.' Our offense definitely played well enough to win; we just didn't hold up our end of the deal," reflected Peter. As the offense started to move the ball, Peter, Wistrom, and colleagues got up to watch the drama unfold. "Honestly, with the style of offense we run, I didn't think it looked good for us to go 67 yards in just over a minute. I take my hat off to the offense and Scott Frost. They put together an incredible drive ending in what has since been referred to as the Immaculate Reception II and the Flea Kicker!" True freshman Matt Davison of Tecumseh, Nebraska, made a miraculous diving grab of a deflected and kicked ball intended for Shevin Wiggins which drew Nebraska within one point of overtime at game's end. Kris Brown converted and the Huskers were still alive. Said Peter, "I didn't even see the catch, but once I knew the game was tied and we were headed into overtime, I believed we would win the game."

As Scott Frost and Ahman Green were preparing to take the ball in for the overtime score, Wistrom and Peter gathered the Blackshirts on the sideline for a final pep talk. "We told them to think about everything up to this point from winter conditioning to summer workouts in the 130-degree on-field temperature of two-a-days. Nobody, including Missouri, has put forth such dedication and made the sacrifices to strive for No. 1. Why are we going to let Missouri ruin our chance at a national title? We said, 'After our offense scores, four downs. Suck it up for four downs and let's get out of here. Be disciplined and know what you have to do and just do it,'" remembered Peter.

Frost scored on a 12-yard run in overtime, giving Nebraska a 45-38 lead and now it was up to the Blackshirts to regain some respect and close out the game. With a 1st-and-10 from the 25, the Blackshirts were determined to keep the Tigers out of the end zone. After two misfires and a 3-yard gain by Jones, it all came down to

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one play, 4th-and-7 from the shotgun. Shortly after getting the ball, Jones was smothered by bookends and Missouri products, Michael Rucker and Grant Wistrom. "It was a fitting end. I really didn't care who made the play as long as someone did," said Wistrom.

Emotions ran high for all involved or even all who witnessed Nebraska's "Great Escape." As one might expect, there was no shortage of excitement and emotion in the Nebraska locker room after the miraculous victory. Recalled Peter, "Everyone was just grateful that we pulled out the victory. There were lots of hugs and high fives."

According to Wistrom, "It was actually reasonably under control in the locker room. It was like everyone was still in such a state of shock or amazement with the flurry-like finish. The look in everyone's eyes was very telling, seemingly saying, we got a break today and let's never let this happen again," he remembered.

With victory in hand, Peter, Wistrom, and company were well aware that Nebraska's near miss would cost them dearly in the polls. "I knew we lost our No. 1 ranking before the end of the game," said Wistrom.

"At this point, the ranking doesn't matter. Maybe a drop in the polls will come back to haunt us in the coming weeks. All I know right now is that we are 9-0 and all of our dreams are still within grasp," said Peter.

Added Wistrom, "It's sad that everything hinges so much on point spreads and the polls. We played in what people will refer to as a classic thriller and I wish we could enjoy the victory without always thinking about the other consequences. The Missouri game was like the kind you dream up in your backyard as a kid. It was fun, exciting, and went down to the wire. I really enjoyed being a part of it."

Peter, likewise, will have long-term memories of the Missouri game. "I will remember the game forever. It's not like winning a national title game but it did keep our hopes alive. The Missouri victory ranks third behind the national championships against Miami and Florida," explained Peter.

Despite the almost certain drop in the polls, Peter and Wistrom believe several positives came out of the Missouri game. First and foremost was the continued emergence of Husker quarterback Scott Frost. Frost was spectacular in leading the Huskers to victory, rushing for a career high 141 yards, four touchdowns, and passing for another 175 yards and one touchdown. "Scott has played extremely well all year and we definitely wouldn't be the same team without him," said Peter.

Added Wistrom, "Scott had emerged as a true leader and was much more competitive and confident. We couldn't ask anything more out of Scott. Players were now looking to Scott for direction and he was answering the call."

The bigger question, would the Huskers answer the call for their final four games? "Hopefully there would be a refocusing of sorts after the Missouri close call," said Wistrom. "We needed to focus on all aspects of the game and fully understand that a complete effort was needed no matter who the opponent or what their history might be. I was determined to make the last games very memorable," exclaimed the demonstrative Wistrom. "I had four more games to enjoy of my college career and then my childhood sport becomes a business. There was incentive to play well in every game," he concluded.

Says Peter, "A win against Iowa State would get us back on track and clinch a spot in the Big 12 Championship. Colorado is Colorado and nothing else needed to be said. The Big 12 game would be easy to get up for. We wanted to redeem ourselves from last year and we deserved to be the Big 12 Conference champions. Finally, the Orange Bowl was a must-win to give us the chance to claim what we lost last season, the national championship!" concluded Peter.

Game 10 - Iowa State Sentimental Seniors

The season-long team motto of the 1997 Nebraska Cornhusker football team had been "No Doubt." After a draining come-from-behind overtime victory the previous weekend against Missouri, the Huskers were determined to play well early and dominate the Iowa State Cyclones from start to finish. Before the Husker faithful would see the game unfold, they would bid farewell to arguably the best senior class in Nebraska football history. On a bitter, cold day, emotions would control the pregame festivities when 23 seniors were introduced to 75,590 Husker faithful, Nebraska's 220th consecutive Memorial Stadium sellout.

According to senior team leader Jason Peter, "I tried to savor every moment of the entire week. Potentially, everything I did that week was for the last time, ranging from sleeping in the bed at the Nebraska Center team hotel to pregame meals and the bus ride to the stadium." Added Peter, "I wish it would have been possible to bronze everything that happened that week so I could have prized keepsakes of my Husker career."

Dedicated Huskers like Peter, Grant Wistrom, and the other 21 seniors put in thousands of hours in the classroom, weight room, on the field, and in the community during their four- or five-year career and then suddenly, in a flash, their time at the brink of the Memorial Stadium turf had arrived. The time was now for each senior to have a brief moment with Husker Head Coach Tom Osborne and then the solo entrance into what had truly been "their house."

Recalled Peter, "I remember going up to Coach Osborne and giving him a hug. I simply thanked the man for everything he had done for me the past five years. In an instant I reflected on the great years I've had at Nebraska from football to lifelong relationships. It's been very special and I wouldn't have changed one thing about my Nebraska career. Nebraska football has given me memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life."

For all of the positive memories in Memorial Stadium, Peter's reaction to the final crowd roar was different than some might suspect. "Hearing the crowd of 76,000 roar for the last time was upsetting and sad to me. There is simply no better atmosphere for college football than the University of Nebraska," concluded Peter. Only time would tell, but perhaps the senior introduction for Peter would prove to be more difficult than the game itself. Said Peter, "The tears wanted to come down and the floodgates nearly opened up. Believe me, it was rough."

Peter's Blackshirt buddy, Grant Wistrom, also found Senior Day to be a very moving experience. "Memorial Stadium and Lincoln has been my home for the last four years so I suspected I would get pretty emotional. I've had many great memories at Memorial Stadium and lots of big wins. It was the last time to play on that field in front of our home fans and I was just in denial hoping this day would never come." Obviously the day did come and on Saturday, November 15, 1997, Wistrom was determined to make Senior Day memorable.

"Starting on the Monday after Missouri, I really made an effort to make my last game a great game for the team and me as an individual. It was important for me to go out with a bang," explained Wistrom. Perhaps one of the most personal moments of a Nebraska seniors' career, the final farewell to Coach Osborne, is witnessed by all on the HuskerVision screens. "I can't begin to describe the range of emotions I was feeling at that time. I was just hoping to maintain some degree of composure. I'm a Blackshirt and didn't want to look like a crying idiot running out onto the home field for the very last time," said Wistrom.

Wistrom was moderately successful in holding back his tears but remembers getting choked up when embracing Coach Osborne shortly before kickoff. "I remember the hug and telling Coach Osborne thanks. I looked at that moment as a final tribute to Coach Osborne and a way for me to acknowledge the impact he has had on my life and my career. I knew that would be one of my last opportunities to publicly thank the best college football coach in the country," concluded Wistrom. After the embrace and during the final stroll on the artificial turf of Memorial Stadium, Wistrom's mind was racing. "I remember thinking that my fellow seniors and I have given so much to the program and soon, in just four quarters, our Memorial Stadium career would be over. I made an effort to really listen to the crowd and look at the crowd as I knew I may never play in front of such loyalty and enthusiasm the remainder of my athletic career," said Wistrom.

Not surprisingly, the introductions of Peter and Wistrom received some of the loudest cheers from the Husker faithful; however, acknowledgment of every senior is a special tradition. "It's really nice that the fans recognize you for the individual you are. It's great that all seniors across the board have their own moment in the spotlight. It doesn't matter if you are a star All-American or a walk-on who rarely plays, we have all put in the same amount of hours and sweat labor to the program," said Wistrom.

"Another Nebraska Senior Day tradition is giving every senior player the opportunity to address the team in the players-only final locker-room talk. It's great that all seniors have the chance to make a statement or two and I really think the guys appreciated the opportunity. Personally, it was neat for me to hear the different perspectives of what the Nebraska football experience has meant to others. The pure determination and persistence of some of these guys to give it their all, pay their own way, and be a scout team player for the majority of their career, earns my total respect. Each and every player said they had no regrets and would do it all over again," said Peter. "When you hear the pride everyone has to represent this team and Coach Osborne, it flat out gives you goose bumps."

After plenty of locker room sentiment and cheering from the crowd, the Huskers were ready to make some noise on the field. "Obviously, we didn't play as well as we should have in the Missouri game and we were disappointed in losing the No. 1 ranking," said Wistrom. "We knew we had to go out and play much better, proving something to ourselves and the college football world. Simply put, our defense had been inconsistent and puzzling this year. Sometimes we had been the best defense in the nation and at other times we had been among the worst. It was absolutely critical that we go out and reestablish ourselves as a great defensive unit from the onset."

Not only did the Huskers have motivation and emotion on their side, the Blackshirts viewed the cold temperature as another definite advantage. "I hate the cold weather, but I think Nebraska always plays well in adverse weather conditions," explained Wistrom. "We are mentally and physically up to the challenge, more so than any other team. Most of us come out there with no sleeves on trying to make a statement to the opponents before the ball is even snapped. Bottom line," said Wistrom, "when you go out and pound someone on a cold day, you can really break a player's spirit in a hurry." Wistrom and company were looking to break the spirit of Iowa State quarterback Todd Bandhauer early and often. "We knew he was rated at or near the top in passing efficiency within the Big 12, so one of the keys would be relentless pressure on the quarterback."

For the most part, it was mission accomplished for Peter, Wistrom, and the Blackshirts. The Cyclone running game could only muster 75 yards on 34 attempts, and by game's end, would only total 153 passing yards. "Even though we didn't get as many sacks as we hoped for, we did a great job of keeping heat on Bandhauer the entire game," recalled Peter. Peter personally caused havoc early on by forcing two pass breakups on the Cyclones' initial drive. Both the Husker defense and offense made quick work of the Cyclones by forcing constant 3rd-and-longs, and short scoring drives. In fact, the Husker offense put up 21 points on just five offensive plays.

The Blackshirts even had several attempts to put up some points against the Cyclones. Chad Kelsay scooped up a fumble and came

up five yards short of the end zone, while the "General" Grant Wistrom couldn't find the handle on a Bandhauer pass that would have almost certainly produced a touchdown. Peter was quick to heckle his defensive teammates for their lack of offensive output. "What can I say? I guess not everyone is capable of being a two-way threat and going the distance. Really, they are still decent players, they just need to concentrate on the basics like catching and running before they try to chew gum at the same time," Peter jokingly said. Peter, without question, has bragging rights on close friend Wistrom after scoring a touchdown on a fumble recovery against Virginia Tech in last season's Orange Bowl.

Nearly everything would work for the Big Red on Senior Day, and Osborne's biggest challenge would be to hold the score down after racing to an impressive 63-7 halftime lead, thanks in large part to prime-time plays made by freshman sensation Bobby Newcombe, quarterback Scott Frost, and I-back Ahman Green. "Halftime was pretty uneventful," recalled Wistrom. "It was good to get warmed up and I think lots of the other guys were getting anxious knowing that they would see some action in the second half." The Husker backups would go on to score two more touchdowns and only allow one, resulting in a 77-14 final score and the team's 10th victory of the season. Nebraska's 77 points set a school record for points in a league game.

Despite the dominating and impressive victory, Peter and Wistrom had some mixed emotions about the way the game played out. "It was kind of a frustrating game in a sense," said Wistrom. "Not much really stood out and I was hoping for lots of special moments with this being my final home game. It was definitely an anticlimactic way to close out our home career." Added Wistrom, "I wish we could have played more of a rival. Oklahoma, or even Colorado, for our senior game would have been my preference, but I know that's out of our control," concluded Wistrom.

Peter agreed, "In some respects, a closer game would have been great for Grant and me as we would have the opportunity to play four quarters as opposed to one. While I was sad that we didn't get

to play more during our final home game, I was elated for all of my senior teammates as they got the chance to play,” remarked Peter.

Not only was Wistrom dejected that the game didn’t produce more playing time and more of a challenge, he was somewhat stunned by the second-half crowd. “No offense to the fans, but for the first time in my college career at Memorial Stadium, the crowd was half gone by the fourth quarter. With the sub-zero temps and blowout score, I probably would have left lots earlier,” admits Wistrom. “It’s just not the way I imagined my last game in Memorial Stadium.” Despite the blowout score and bitter cold temperature, both Peter and Wistrom had a difficult time leaving the field at game’s end.

“I was really cold and wanted to get off the field and into the locker room. Still, I couldn’t force myself to do it. I wanted to stay out there and just soak everything in. I wanted to thank the home fans one last time,” said Wistrom. His final thoughts while running into the locker room, “This is really it, it’s over. It’s been a great four years and hopefully the team can come up with three more victories.”

Nebraska’s win against Iowa State was monumental. The victory was the 42nd consecutive home victory and meant that the senior class was never defeated in Memorial Stadium. “We have established the fact that Memorial Stadium is the toughest place in America to play college football. We take lots of pride in making Memorial Stadium an intimidating experience for the opponents,” concluded Wistrom.

“It’s amazing to go undefeated at home during your entire college career,” exclaimed Peter. “There are guys who never experience what we’ve gone through here. I mean, it’s not just winning every game, it’s much more than that. Every game is sold out, the fans are unbelievable, and we are playing for ‘the man’—Tom Osborne. We play so hard with high-level intensity because that is the best way to say thanks to our fans and our coaches,” said Peter.

Nebraska’s victory over Iowa State clinched a return visit to the

Big 12 Championship game. The Huskers would face Big 12 South Champion Texas A&M on December 6 at the Alamodome in San Antonio, Texas. On clinching the Big 12 North title, Peter said, "It really doesn't have any major significance and doesn't mean you've accomplished anything yet. All it means is you have earned the chance to play in the title game."

Added Wistrom, "Basically, it was just another victory and one step closer to our overall goal of a national championship."

Before the Huskers could focus on the Texas A&M Aggies and their possible first-ever Big 12 Championship, all efforts would need to be directed to the University of Colorado for the Thanksgiving weekend matchup in Boulder.

Game 11 - Colorado "Holding On!"

Ten games in the books, a berth in the Big 12 championship game secured, and still on track for the Orange Bowl and yet another national title. The mighty Nebraska Cornhuskers were still in line to reach all of their preseason goals and dreams. Conversely, the Huskers would once again be playing with high stakes and much to lose. Their opponent, preseason No. 1 and talent-rich Colorado was a dangerous team with also much at stake. With a record of 5-5 heading into the game, the Buffaloes were playing for a winning season, a bowl game bid, and national respect.

"You always have to be concerned when you are playing a team that really has nothing to lose," said Peter. "They can lay it all on the line because they aren't expected to win."

According to Wistrom, when Nebraska and Colorado are about to square off, throw the records out the window. "Records don't matter. It's Colorado and Nebraska so nothing else needs to be said. They could erase their previous five losses and make their entire season by beating us. I'm sure if Nebraska is the only game they win each year, some would be happy with their season and consider it a good year," summarized Wistrom. Bottom line, the Huskers knew they would be challenged in Boulder on Friday, November 28, and felt fortunate to have some extra time to get ready for the all-important game.

After practicing Monday through Friday following the Iowa State victory, Coach Tom Osborne gave the Huskers a weekend off.

Said Peter, "The season gets old and long. At times it feels like it takes forever. The season seems especially long and demanding the way we do things at Nebraska. We have pads on three times out of the week and our bodies really take a beating. Of course, this helps us to be better prepared for the games, but one day of rest on Sunday doesn't give your body much time to recover."

Like Peter, Wistrom also welcomed the weekend off. "It was good to get some bumps and bruises healed up; and let's face it, this late in the season, we shouldn't need two weeks to get ready for an opponent."

Defensive mainstay Peter, perhaps, would stand to benefit the most from some time away from the gridiron. "I was suffering back spasms leading up to the Colorado game and really didn't say much to anyone. I guess I was in some form of denial thinking the pain would go away. I was getting some treatment on my back and thought that would be enough to get me through," said Peter.

Contrary to popular belief, Huskers like Peter and Wistrom do much more than get ready for college football games. Said Wistrom, "I think some fans are clueless what goes on from one Saturday to the next. They just click on the television and assume that we will always be there and be ready to go full speed."

The week of the Colorado game was a typical one for Peter and Wistrom. In the midst of daily practice, team meetings, weightlifting, classes, tutorial sessions, and medical treatment, Peter and Wistrom made yet another public appearance. This time it was serving as "Celebrity Readers" at an area preschool. "It was tons of fun. I was surprised at such a young age how smart these kids were. I remember one little boy seeing the Roman numeral 12 on my jersey and being able to tell me what it meant and about his fascination with math. I mean, this kid was cute and it was reminiscent of a scene out of the Jerry Maguire movie," said Wistrom.

"I was just relieved they could find some books with small words and big pictures that Mr. Academic All-American Grant Wistrom could manage to read," ribbed Peter.

After a weekend off when most of the players and even the

coaches turned into "couch potatoes" watching marquee matchups Ohio State vs. Michigan and Florida vs. Florida State, could the Huskers get fine-tuned with just three more days of practice before departing for the Rocky Mountains on Thanksgiving Day? "I thought we had a pretty good, but not great, week of practice going into Colorado. We were well prepared and ready to play. With Jason missing Monday and Tuesday, it seemed practice didn't have the same intensity, but overall, I felt good about the preparations," summarized Wistrom.

It was on Tuesday of the week of the Colorado game when much of the media blitz focused on the polls and the importance of scoring "style points." In fact, during the regular Tuesday press conference, some Huskers violated the golden media rule and were baited into delivering "bulletin-board" material for other teams nationwide. Much of the attention focused on Nebraska's impression of top-ranked Michigan. Remarked Peter, "I know what I think about them and how I think we would match up against them. Fortunately, I have enough experience with the media that I have learned to keep those thoughts to myself and not share them with the nation." Heading into Boulder, it seemed, in a sense, that some circles of the media forgot Nebraska actually was playing against Colorado and not the pollsters. In fact, most of the media agreed that the Huskers would have little, if any, difficulty with Rick Neuheisel's Colorado team and should win by at least 21 points.

"Point spreads in college athletics just don't make sense," said Peter. "It's not enough to win games anymore. You have to make the spread or you are subject to dropping in the polls. Those expectations are fair for professionals but not for amateurs, in my opinion."

Putting style points and point spreads aside, Peter and the Huskers would be able to come up with a variety of angles for team motivation prior to the Colorado-Nebraska game. "Obviously, this game is a national championship game. If we win, we are still in the hunt; and if we lose, we can't win it all and head into the Big 12 title game in a tailspin," explained Peter when talking of motivation to play well against Colorado.

Furthermore, the Huskers failed to forget bulletin board material provided by Colorado defensive back Ryan Black. According to Peter, Black's comments were something to the effect of, "If Nebraska thinks they are going to come into Boulder and win, they are crazy. We have every intention of knocking the crap out of Nebraska." Peter had the following reaction to the ill-advised comments. "You just don't say that, especially to a team that has dominated you for the past five seasons. Maybe he thought he could pull a James Brown (Texas quarterback) and back up his hype. It proves to me that Colorado doesn't have as much class as Nebraska. You don't put down your opponents, especially a team that has won two out of the last three national championships," said Peter.

Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 27, the Huskers were ready to head to Boulder for a nationally televised game. Before departing, the Husker travel squad would celebrate Thanksgiving with a traditional dinner at the Hewitt Center Performance Buffet in West Stadium. "It's neat to have Thanksgiving dinner with the coaches and their family. Our coaches and all of the Nebraska staff really go out of their way to create a family atmosphere during a holiday to ease the fact that we aren't with our own family members. It would definitely be nice to celebrate the holidays with your own family, but being with your teammates, coaches, staff, and their family is a close second," commented Wistrom.

Peter, like Wistrom, would enjoy spending a Thanksgiving or Christmas holiday with family, however, he realizes there are some positives to be had. "We were playing on national television and everybody is watching your game. You are the focal point of college football and can turn some heads with an impressive performance," cited Peter.

Upon arriving in Boulder, Peter could begin to sense some problems with his back. "The plane ride to Colorado and the 40-minute bus ride to the stadium really killed me. It was very rough on my back," remarked Peter.

After a brief walk-through at Folsom Field on Thanksgiving and team meetings that evening and the next morning, the second-

ranked Huskers were ready to do battle. Guys like Peter and Wistrom thrive on the atmosphere provided by the Colorado faithful. Recalled Wistrom, "While busing into the stadium, we are usually subjected to lots of one-finger waves and other not-so-flattering gestures. That kind of nonsense just adds fuel to my fire and makes me play with even more of a passion," indicated the All-American Wistrom.

Just before kickoff, the Husker captains would once again deliver an emotional locker room message. "I reminded the team that Nebraska vs. Oklahoma is a true rivalry. Oklahoma treats us with respect leading up to the game and during the game. It's a mutual respect. With Colorado, this is a rivalry that they designated. They rely on trash talk every year and have consistently been disrespectful to our program. That alone was more than enough incentive for a great game," explained the emotional Peter.

Peter, Wistrom, and company got off to a solid start against the Buffaloes. On Nebraska's opening drive, Kris Brown converted on a 25-yard field goal, and in the second quarter, Scott Frost scampered 19 yards, giving Nebraska a commanding 10-0 lead shortly before halftime. Colorado, however, would gain some momentum after gaining 43 yards on a fake punt to set up a 30-yard field goal for a 10-3 Nebraska lead at intermission. "Defensively, we were pretty happy with the way the first half went. We gave up a couple of big plays but overall had a solid half," remarked Peter.

Added Wistrom, "Sometimes the score doesn't show the domination of a game and that was definitely the case with the first half."

During the second half, the Huskers would have to contend with a determined Buffalo team playing for pride and some rowdy fans. "Boulder definitely provides a hostile environment and things really heated up during the second half," said Wistrom.

The Colorado fans are directly behind the Husker bench, and according to Peter, one heckling fan was in rare form. "Some old man was just going off on Coach Osborne. They can harass the players as much as they want, but when they start going after the

main man, that's a mistake. You're talking about the best coach in the history of college football and some bum is sitting behind us heckling our leader. It really gets you boiling and you have to really dig deep to avoid retaliation," summarized Peter.

Peter and Wistrom would hope to silence the Buffalo fans by shutting down Colorado in the second half. After a two-play Husker scoring drive to open up the third quarter, Nebraska was one defensive stop away from possibly putting the game out of control. "If we could have held them to three-and-out, it would have been such a momentum shift," said Wistrom. Instead, Colorado immediately answered Ahman Green's score with a three-play scoring drive of their own to stay within just one touchdown of Nebraska. Then in the third quarter, Nebraska added another Ahman Green touchdown and Kris Brown field goal to seemingly put the game out of question with a 27-10 lead going into the final quarter. Suddenly, what was a solid performance became suspect and Nebraska would have to hold on for dear life to record a perfect 11-0 regular season to stay on course for a third national championship in four seasons.

"I think the offense got somewhat stale and self-destructed. We were clearly dominating the game and kind of got lulled into a sleep," remembered Peter. "With about 10 minutes left in the fourth quarter, I think everyone, from all of the players to the fans, felt the game was over. I remember their offensive huddle joking and laughing, not taking the game serious at all. At that point, we should have put the nail in the coffin but couldn't get it done."

"Before you know it, they hit a couple of big pass plays and are in the end zone, and we are only up by 10 points," said Wistrom who finished the game with five total tackles and one sack. "When Colorado recovered the onside kick, we knew this game was going down to the wire and they would be passing on every down." With just 2:34 left in the game, John Hessler converted on his third touchdown pass of the game on an 18-yard strike to Robert Toler to cut Nebraska's lead to 27-24.

During the fourth quarter, it appeared the Blackshirts were

unable to pressure CU quarterback Hessler. "It was a combination of things," explained Peter. "As the game drew closer, they picked up their intensity and spirit while we were becoming fatigued. Also, they were one of the best holding teams I've played against and I have a torn-up jersey to prove it."

Fortunately for Nebraska, Colorado was unsuccessful in converting their next onside attempt and now the Cornhusker offense would simply need one first down to run out the clock and escape with a dramatic victory. The Colorado defense would force Nebraska into a 4th-and-1. Husker quarterback Scott Frost was unable to draw the Buffalo defenders offside, and thus, Tom Osborne elected to punt the ball away. Once again, the outcome of the game would rest in the hands of the Blackshirts.

"It's the same thing Coach Osborne did at Missouri. He put the game in our hands and was counting on us to stop them. He put unbelievable trust in us," cited Wistrom.

The Husker Blackshirts once again came through in the clutch, but not without some nervous moments and another critical penalty at a crucial time. Colorado was penalized for offensive pass interference making for a 3rd-and-25. After an incompletion, it came down to 4th-and-25. Hessler hit receiver Phil Savoy, who then made a nice run coming up just a few yards short of a first down thanks to a determined tackle by true freshman Husker defensive back Erwin Swiney. "It was good to see the secondary end the game on a positive play, especially on such a heady play by a youngster like Erwin," said Peter.

Despite literally "hanging on" for a 27-24 victory, the Huskers were far from satisfied with their overall performance. "We pride ourselves in playing a complete game and being a fourth-quarter team," said Wistrom. "We gave up 154 fourth-quarter yards and over 450 yards for the game."

Added Peter, "Obviously we were frustrated and disappointed with the game. You can't let a team back in and almost ruin your season. The game should have been long gone in the third quarter, but we just had some critical mistakes which almost cost us dearly." Bottom line, said Wistrom, "Nebraska won the football game!"

During the Colorado game, some noteworthy accomplishments occurred. Perhaps the most significant was accomplished by quarterback Scott Frost, who became the first Husker to throw and rush for 1,000 yards in a single season, becoming only the 11th collegian to achieve such a feat. Reacted Peter, "Scott has done a tremendous job all year. You can't take anything away from what he has done and I would rank him as one of the most complete and versatile quarterbacks in the country. Last year I think Scott was somewhat anxious and this season he has been relaxed and very confident."

Husker junior placekicker Kris Brown also played well, converting on two field goals giving the Dallas, Texas, native a string of 12 consecutive field goals. "At the beginning of the season, he was in somewhat of a slump. Jason and I shaved his head to give him more of a 'Blackshirt' mentality and the kid hasn't missed since," explained Wistrom.

Whereas the likes of Frost and Brown had landmark performances, Wistrom drew marginally closer to one of his Nebraska career goals of becoming the Huskers' all-time sack leader. Wistrom had a first-quarter sack of Colorado quarterback John Hessler, yet was still three short of surpassing all-time sack master Trev Alberts. "I was definitely thinking about the record and still hoped to get it. If I were to get the sack record and the team suffers, then it's no good anyway. All I can control is going out and playing as well as I can to help the team. I knew I still had one more game and in the back of my mind was thinking I might be able to pull off a hat trick and get three sacks against Texas A&M."

Wistrom would be ready to go in just over a week for the Big 12 Championship game in San Antonio, but the big question was the status of teammate and All-America defender Jason Peter. "After the Colorado game, my back was extremely tight. It was very tough to walk and feel comfortable. I took some medication and was just hoping that within the next three or four days, there would be some major improvement," expressed Peter.

Peter was looking for an improved back and the Huskers were

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looking for an improved performance, ultimately reaching yet another preseason team goal, the Big 12 Conference Championship.

Texas A & M Finally, Big 12 Champions!

Nearly one year after the shocker in St. Louis, where the Texas Longhorns upset the Huskers in the 1996 Big 12 Championship game, a shot at redemption had finally arrived.

According to Wistrom, who was recently named a finalist for the prestigious Lombardi Award, preparations were crisp for Texas A&M. He remembered, "We had a great week of practice and you could sense a strong degree of confidence leading up to the game. Everybody was really excited to finally get some redemption for what happened last year in St. Louis. Even if we go out and totally dominate Texas A&M, it will never ease the pain of the Texas loss, but it will sure go a long way in the healing process."

Speaking of healing, Outland Trophy finalist Jason Peter wasn't faring well. Peter didn't practice at all on Monday, Tuesday, or Thursday, and was limited on Wednesday. "I was starting to really get concerned as I was suffering from multiple spasms. My back wasn't responding to treatment and I had serious doubts if I'd be able to play on Saturday," summarized Peter.

As preparations continued for Peter and company, primary concerns appeared to be A&M's fast defense and strong running game. Said Wistrom, "A&M was ranked something like sixth in the nation for total offense and the Blackshirts definitely recognized we would be challenged. Going into the game, we felt (that) if we held true to our game plan of shutting down the run first and making them rely on the pass, we would be in good shape." Whereas

Wistrom and his fellow Blackshirts were preparing strategy on how to stop the A&M offense, A&M was most likely developing a game plan to neutralize Wistrom, who earlier in the week was named the Big 12 Conference Defensive Player-of-the-Year for the second straight year. "I didn't feel like that honor put any additional pressure on me. I had to go out and play like I always play. You can't control how others are going to play against you. All I can do is control my effort and intensity," exclaimed Wistrom.

Arriving in San Antonio on Friday afternoon, December 5, all indicators were that Nebraska was ready to "walk the walk" near the popular Riverwalk only minutes away from the Alamodome. The Huskers had their customary Friday walk-through, and for the most part, were pleased with the playing atmosphere. Recalled Peter, "Going into this game, I was anxious about playing in a dome." Most of Peter's apprehensions could be attributed to the negative encounter he and the Huskers had in St. Louis at the Trans World Dome, losing to the Longhorns in the inaugural Big 12 Championship game in 1996. "The TWA Dome had a rock-hard turf that was very sharp. Also, the sound system echoed throughout the game and was very distracting," recalled Peter. Peter was favorably impressed with the Alamodome. "The turf was much better and overall I think our guys felt pretty relaxed."

Wistrom's take on the Alamodome was also positive. "As far as domes go, this was as good as I've seen. It wasn't intimidating or overwhelming. I've never really been a fan of domes. To me, it feels like you are playing in a convention center and it takes away the purity and the elements of the game," remarked Wistrom.

With game time now less than 24 hours away, Nebraska coaches, trainers, and fans were becoming increasingly concerned with the status of Peter's tight back. "On Friday night, Coach Osborne called me in my hotel room and asked if I thought I could help the team. He knows the type of person I am and that I wouldn't want to be out there if I didn't think I could contribute or be a difference-maker. I told Coach Osborne that if things didn't improve by tomorrow, I would definitely be a no-go." Peter, however, didn't

give up on treatment. "I spent Friday night in a hotel hot tub, and then the next morning, sat in the bathtub. Fortunately, my back felt much better and I knew I would be able start the game," explained Peter.

Peter also felt that his presence alone on the field would benefit his Blackshirt teammates and the entire Husker squad. "In a big game like the Big 12 Championship, I felt even if I was just in there for one series and maybe get something rolling, it would make a statement to my teammates. If the other guys saw me out there, knowing I was fighting the adversity, they would get the message that this game and the season were extremely important to me," said Peter.

As one might well imagine, the Nebraska locker room was full of emotion prior to the Huskers taking the field for the kickoff against the Aggies. Coach Osborne's pregame message hit home with his players. "Basically he said that this game was a blessing in disguise. This game gave us yet another chance at national exposure to prove to the doubters, especially after Colorado, that we are a dominant team," recalled Wistrom.

Peter and Wistrom were especially hyped during the captains' comments before the game. "The defense took the blame for the loss against Texas and we were determined to get Coach Osborne the Big 12 Championship he should have received in 1996," said Wistrom.

Peter said, "I told the guys that this is our conference and our championship. There would be no way that we were going to let a 9-2 team become conference champions and ruin our shot at the bigger prize, a national title. This was the most fired up I've seen the guys in quite a while. I could tell they were ready to play and would give tremendous effort."

The Huskers would leave "no doubt" from the very beginning and would follow the lead of inspirational leader and team captain Jason Peter, injured back and all. Texas A&M took the opening kickoff, and then on the first play from scrimmage, Peter was able to "throw up the bones" in celebration of sacking quarterback

Brannndon Stewart. "My back felt relatively good and I wanted to make a statement to my teammates as well as to A&M," explained Peter.

Indeed, Peter and the Blackshirts were on a mission forcing the Aggies to three-and-out on their first five drives. In fact, on Texas A&M's second series, Peter continued to do some damage batting down a Stewart pass at the line of scrimmage. Recalled Peter, "I was playing the game on adrenaline and probably could have gone a little bit longer but had to make an early exit on a freak play." Peter aggravated his back trying to avoid contact with an official when chasing down a play. Thus, with 8:53 remaining in the second quarter and already up on the Aggies by a 23-3 score, Peter was forced to the sidelines.

When Peter went out, Wistrom reiterated what he had earlier told defensive tackles Jason Wiltz and Steve Warren. "I stressed to those guys that they would have to turn it up a notch and I was really pleased the way they both responded," stressed Wistrom.

Without question, the Blackshirts were playing as well as they had all season. During the first half, the Aggies had minus-5 yards rushing and only 83 total yards. "I'll be honest with you," said Wistrom, "our defense was reeling with a less than desirable performance against Missouri and then having to hang on for dear life at Colorado. We needed that type of start to regain our confidence."

For as good as the Husker defense was in the first half, arguably, the Husker offense was even better. Led by the golden toe of junior placekicker Kris Brown, Nebraska scored on its first five possessions of the game taking a 23-0 lead early in the second quarter. By game's end, Brown would connect on a total of four field goals, giving him 16 consecutive kicks that split the uprights. Peter and Wistrom's admiration for the play of Kris Brown, Ahman Green, Scott Frost, Joel Makovicka, and the Husker offensive pipeline is well documented. They continue to be amazed at the caliber of plays made by true freshman utility player Bobby Newcombe. "The kid is amazing and plays with confidence and composure," said Peter.

"The thing that impresses me about Bobby is that he is a quality young man, all business, and very respectful. I'm going to go out on a limb and predict he has a huge future in the Nebraska program," explained Wistrom.

After literally putting the game away in the first half with a 37-3 halftime lead, the challenge for the Huskers would be to play a complete game and avoid another Colorado-like finish. "In my opinion, the defense still played great in the second half. A&M moved the ball better on us in the second half, but when you look at the field position they were getting off of our turnovers, we did a good job of keeping them out of the end zone," said Wistrom. In fact, of the 15 points scored by Texas A&M, one touchdown was off of a Husker fumble when Jason Glenn raced 35 yards for a score.

In addition to a convincing lead from start to finish, both Peter and Wistrom were impressed with the crowd intensity and championship atmosphere throughout the entire game. "It was an electric atmosphere," said Peter. "You had two energetic crowds, great bands, and a championship at stake. It was a great game to play in. My only regret is that I wasn't a part of the game longer than I was."

Wistrom was likewise impressed by the effort of all the players and the fans. "A&M played hard all the way to the end and I think they regained some pride in the second half. I respect the fans and all of the tradition of A&M. You couldn't help but take notice of that, even as a player. The A&M fans were certainly loyal and proud to the bitter end," remarked Wistrom.

By the end of the game, the Huskers could be proud of their dominating championship effort. The Blackshirts only allowed 18 additional rushing yards in the second half for a total of 13 for the entire game. Also, the Nebraska defense recorded a season-high six sacks. For Wistrom, his earlier comments would end up being very true. Wistrom was unable to get a single sack, let alone the three needed for the all-time school record; thus, individual feats would, without question, take a backseat to the more meaningful team accomplishment. The Huskers amassed 536 yards and nearly doubled the first-down total of A&M, producing a score of 54-15.

Twelve would prove to be a special number on December 6 in the Alamodome. Number 12 Bobby Newcombe showed up big, early, and often; and with the victory, the Huskers were now 12-0 and Big 12 Conference champions.

Finally, the Huskers earned sweet revenge. Sweet revenge not against the Aggies but against themselves. Said Wistrom, "This team is forever a part of history, winning the school's first-ever Big 12 Championship. All of us felt very relieved, like we got a huge monkey off our backs considering what happened last year."

Peter agreed, "This Big 12 title had been haunting us for a full year and it was just a huge relief to get the championship. I mean it was a tough burden to shoulder for an entire year. We weren't even conference champions, yet we were one game away from playing for the national title. Last year we won only half of the conference, which is basically like kissing your sister. This year we were determined and got the whole deal. We needed this championship because my finger was getting light and it's nice to know I'll be adding another rock to my hand with a Big 12 Championship ring," concluded Peter.

Wistrom's emotions were running especially high after Nebraska's Big 12 Championship victory. Sporting a Big 12 Conference Championship hat, Wistrom ironically celebrated the feat with first-year position coach Nelson Barnes who was also on the victorious sideline in last year's Big 12 Conference tilt. "I was just very happy the way my season was winding down and wanted to savor a few more moments of the celebration," remembered Wistrom.

Wistrom, as he frequently does, went to the heart of the Nebraska fans and expressed his appreciation for their support. "Our fans are awesome. They stuck around the whole game. If I could have personally shook every one of their hands, I would have been glad to do it. Hearing the fans cheer for you in recognition of your hard work and loyalty means a great deal to me. I love to scream with our fans and I hope the next special moment I share with the fans is to celebrate a national title."

Peter, Wistrom, the entire squad, and the coaching staff were finally at a point in the season where they could savor the achievements of the team. "Prior to this point, there was always something more, that we could never get too excited. The 250th was great, but we still had big games in front of us. Beating Iowa State to clinch the Big 12 and beating Colorado were also significant, but we never felt like we could enjoy anything until we got to this point," said Peter. "We're 12-0, Big 12 Champs, and we are going to the Orange Bowl to play for the national championship. We realize we have reached a major goal and now we have to just finish it off and leave no doubt."

Wistrom's philosophy was similar. "Savor the Big 12 title but don't lose sight of what lies ahead of us. Right now, we are at the pinnacle of college football. It's a neat feeling knowing that your final game will have national championship implications," said Wistrom.

The words "final game" are hard for some football players to accept. "Fortunately, it looks like Grant and I are going to have the chance to live our childhood dreams and play pro football. Looking back at it, you just wish you could play college football the rest of your life," said Peter.

"The friends, the teammates, the guidance, the thrills, the fans—you just don't get that anywhere else and once you become a professional, it's an all-out business," added Wistrom. "I have mixed emotions knowing I have one college football game left. I'm excited about being on the verge of realizing my pro aspirations, but truly saddened that my college career is down to just four quarters."

On Sunday, December 7, it was confirmed that Nebraska's Orange Bowl opponent on January 2, 1998, would be third-ranked Tennessee. Said Peter, "We were looking forward to playing Tennessee. Nebraska had never played a Tennessee team and to go head-to-head with Heisman favorite and projected No. 1 NFL pick Peyton Manning would get my best effort," remarked Peter.

Added Wistrom, "We realized the pass rush would be critical and we couldn't give Manning much, if any, time to throw. I'm sure

some people would question how our secondary would match up against a pro-style quarterback and offense, and my reply was that I had all of the confidence in the world in that group. At the beginning of the year, some of those guys were young and raw. Twelve games later, those guys were not rookies. They were a year wiser and a year more experienced."

Another factor in Nebraska's favor was the experience of Dr. Tom Osborne. "Coach Osborne is the best coach in the country, and when you give him even a week to prepare, he is awesome. You give the man nearly a month, he and the other coaches will put together a great game plan and I knew our team would play well," said Wistrom.

Peter added, "Remember, we had been in national championship games before and we were focused for 12 months on returning to Miami and Pro Player Park. There is a huge difference. This year we were playing for all of the marbles."

The Week of December 7th “Emotional Roller Coaster”

After gaining redemption and Nebraska's first-ever Big 12 Conference Championship with a convincing 54-15 victory over Texas A&M in the 1997 Big 12 Championship game, Husker fans and players had much to celebrate. Nebraska's victory sealed a perfect 12-0 regular season, the conference title, and a berth in the Federal Express Orange Bowl on January 2, 1998, against the Tennessee Volunteers.

Whereas Husker fans could celebrate at will, players opting to do so would have to exercise community caution. Said Peter, “Typically, we stay at home and hang out with friends and people who have our best interests in mind. On occasion, it's fun to go downtown, get a bite to eat, and hang out with the college crowd.”

Upon arriving back in Lincoln from San Antonio, Texas, on December 6, Peter and Wistrom went to a popular downtown Lincoln pizza establishment. Recalled Wistrom, “What started out as a simple and innocent evening went bad in a hurry. I was simply standing up for a woman who in my opinion was being harassed. After telling some guys to knock it off and leave the lady alone, in a matter of seconds, I was getting torn up by a group of guys.” Fortunately, All-American Jason Peter was in the basement of the restaurant and did not get involved. Wistrom demonstrated remarkable restraint and didn't retaliate despite suffering a cut eye and cut lip.

First and foremost, Wistrom was extremely upset that the

incident took place. "I have put 3 ½ years into building a good community image and representing the University of Nebraska to the best of my ability. Suddenly, in a brief 30-second span, I saw everything I've worked so hard for potentially wiped out." Even though he never threw a punch, Wistrom was initially charged with disturbing the peace only later to have the charges dropped. Still, however, Wistrom felt the damage had been done. "The incident and mixed reactions will always be out there. People know it happened and I just hope they understand my perspective. I feel like the majority of the media represented the incident fairly," summarized Wistrom.

Since the incident, which occurred in the early hours of December 7th, Wistrom has received considerable notes of encouragement. Said Wistrom, "I have received lots of letters expressing support and telling me I did the right thing by intervening and attempting to help someone who was at risk, especially since it was a woman." According to Wistrom, he acted upon instincts and didn't think twice about getting involved. "When someone is getting picked on or harassed, you obviously can't have that. Especially when a man is messing with a woman. That is simply inexcusable and intolerable. What I thought was an attempt at a verbal diffusion ended up with me getting mauled. I did what I honestly thought was right and if I saw the same situation taking place in the future, I'm sure I'd act the same way. The only thing I'd do differently is try to get out of the way when the flurry of punches start coming at me."

Perhaps the most difficult encounter Wistrom would have concerning the incident would be a Monday morning discussion with Head Coach Tom Osborne. "I was leaving early that morning for New York for the National Football Foundation presentation and wanted to get in to explain myself to Coach Osborne. I was nervous about having to visit with Coach Osborne about the incident because, despite my innocence, I knew the program and Coach Osborne would suffer for my actions," said Wistrom.

Not surprisingly, Wistrom's off-field incident received more

coast-to-coast publicity than any on-field play he made during the 1997 campaign. "That's just part of the deal. When you are an All-American player, even something this minor becomes a major story and front-page headlines," remarked Wistrom. Wistrom recalls Osborne's reaction during their brief meeting. "He was very supportive and understanding. I believe he would have wanted me to react exactly how I did if the situation repeated itself."

Added Wistrom, "Even though I have and will always maintain my innocence, I feel like I owe Coach Osborne and the loyal Nebraska fans a sincere apology and a thank you for their loyalty and understanding."

After visiting with Coach Osborne, Wistrom was on his way to New York City to receive an \$18,000 National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Postgraduate Scholarship. Unfortunately for Grant, he would be attending the black-tie affair with a black eye and several other noticeable scrapes and bruises. "Honestly, that was one of the first concerns that came to my mind shortly after getting whooped up on. Gee, now I've got to go to three major award ceremonies with a black eye and busted up lip," commented Wistrom. "Furthermore, there would be many people asking the obvious, 'Hey, Grant, what happened to you?'" Said Wistrom, "I knew I would have to honestly and consistently explain the incident various times. It was tempting to say that my damaged face was courtesy of the Texas A&M Aggies during the Big 12 Championship game, but I knew the story would break in the newspapers and therefore I had to be totally up front and honest," concluded Wistrom.

Now, after 3 ½ years of hard work, dedication, persistence, time management, and goal-setting, Wistrom would start to reap some dividends for his commitment to athletic and academic excellence starting with the trip to New York. "Being one of the National Football Foundation Scholar-Athletes was one of the most special honors I have received during my career. It was a refreshing experience to see that there are many All-American football players who are outstanding students." Among some of the other notables

being honored included top scholar-athlete Peyton Manning of Tennessee, Michigan quarterback Brian Griese, and Daryl Bush of Florida State. Said Wistrom, "It's all a matter of time management. Do you really want to get it done? The guys that want to get it done will take care of business and then there is always a percentage that will just do enough to barely sneak by. Obviously, I think students should take a great deal of pride in representing their school, not just as a great athlete, but also as a capable student."

Wistrom's roommate in New York was fellow scholar-athlete and unofficial archrival Brian Griese, quarterback of the top-ranked Michigan Wolverines. "Brian was a good guy and it was fun getting acquainted with him. Certainly, I would have enjoyed getting to know him better on the football field so that Nebraska could control its own destiny. Instead, I had to settle for getting up close and personal with Peyton Manning," stated Wistrom. "Whether it be Griese or Manning, there was very little, if any, talk of college football among the athletes. With such big names in attendance, you would think there would be some big egos there, but I think the guys must have checked their egos at the door. Everyone was really laid back and just there to have a good time and kind of get a break away from the game."

Continued Wistrom, "The New York trip was fun and exciting. Everything was memorable from staying at the historic Waldorf Astoria to seeing the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall, meeting legendary coaches, and countless sports celebrities. I was definitely humbled by the whole trip and definitely in awe by the company I was keeping."

After the Webb City, Missouri, native spent Monday and Tuesday in New York City, it was time to move on to Houston, Texas, to the much anticipated Lombardi Award presentation on December 10, 1997—a day that won't soon be forgotten in Husker history.

Deep down, Grant Wistrom truly felt he was deserving of the Lombardi Award, recognition of the nation's best interior defensive lineman. Still, however, Wistrom refused to believe that he was a

front-runner for one of the top defensive football honors in the country. "I heard it was going to come down between me and Andre Wadsworth of Florida State. Honestly, I thought he was the odds-on favorite simply because his statistics were better than mine," said Wistrom. Prior to the announcement of the award, Wistrom was optimistic, yet preparing himself for the fact that he might not get the coveted prize. "I wasn't about to base the success of my senior season on an individual award. It has always been important to me that we be in Miami on January 2 playing for the national championship, and in that sense, nothing else even compares."

Before Wistrom could totally focus his energies on the National Championship Orange Bowl showdown with the Tennessee Volunteers, some hardware had to be distributed. One thing was for certain, the Lombardi winner would come from a very successful team. Not surprisingly, finalists Andre Wadsworth of Florida State, Greg Ellis of North Carolina, and eventual Butkus winner Andy Katzenmoyer of Ohio State all joined Wistrom as members of highly successful programs. Said Wistrom, "It's no coincidence that everyone contending for the Lombardi played on a great football team. I guess it does go to show you that even individual honors are really team honors in a sense. I can guarantee you that if I had the same type of season on a team that finished 3-9, I wouldn't have been in Houston on December 10."

While Wistrom and the other Lombardi finalists were participating in an afternoon pre-banquet press conference, a press conference of mammoth proportions was about to begin in Lincoln at 3:00 p.m. CST. "Earlier in the week I heard some rumors that Coach Osborne was going to retire. I was relieved to hear that he announced, at his Tuesday press conference, that would not be the case," said Wistrom. Then, on Wednesday at approximately 2:30 p.m., suddenly it was apparent something significant was about to happen. "As I was doing interviews about the Lombardi, I was given a note to call back to the Nebraska football office as soon as possible. I immediately called and first spoke with Mary Lyn Wininger, Coach Osborne's secretary." It didn't take long and Wistrom could

tell something out of the ordinary was taking place. "Mary Lyn sounded really quiet and somber. Coach wasn't immediately available and Mary Lyn said it was extremely important that I visit with Coach Osborne within the next few minutes. Shortly, Coach Osborne called me back to say that the time had come for him to hang it up and step aside," recalls Wistrom.

Although numbed by Coach Osborne's decision, Wistrom never once questioned Coach Osborne's intentions. "It really caught me off guard; yet, at the same time, I understood. I know how much the players mean to Coach Osborne and how much coaching the game of football means to the man. So, if he decided it was time to hang it up, I knew something was weighing heavily upon his mind. I simply said to myself that he must have his reasons and then went on to tell him how much I appreciated the opportunity to play under him for four seasons. I thanked him for everything he has done for me personally and told him that I thought he was a great man," summarized Wistrom.

Speculation of Osborne's retirement did become reality. After Osborne discussed his retirement with the team, he officially ended his "era of excellence" at a jam-packed and very emotional press conference that same afternoon. Then, Coach Osborne was off to see Wistrom in person as Osborne had previously committed to attend the Lombardi Awards Banquet.

Just a few hours later, another important announcement related to the history of Nebraska football would be made. Rush end Grant Wistrom would win the school's fourth-ever Lombardi Award following the footsteps of Rich Glover, Dave Rimington, and Dean Steinkuhler. Upon hearing his name announced as the 28th Lombardi Award winner, he wasn't convinced he was indeed the recipient. "For some reason I was convinced there must be another Grant up for the award. When I heard my full name, Grant Wistrom, then I knew it was real and I let out a huge sigh. I got up and shook hands with Coach Osborne, the other candidates, and other coaches and then went on to accept the trophy. I thanked God for giving me the athletic ability I enjoy, thanked my parents

for always being there for me, and of course thanked Coach Osborne and my Nebraska teammates.”

Wistrom was especially honored that Coach Osborne was able to share in his special moment. “I know, on the night of the announcement of his retirement, he probably had a few other things on his mind, so I was genuinely appreciative that he was able to attend.”

Never one to savor individual awards over team success, Wistrom couldn’t hold back his emotions. “I am very proud to be considered one of the best defensive players in the country. I’ve been playing football since I was seven years old, and if you asked me when I was a kid if I ever thought I would accomplish something this major, I wouldn’t have believed it for a minute. Even in high school, I never thought I could play at a school like Nebraska, and when arriving at Nebraska, I thought I would be a role player and never imagined becoming a starter or All-American and now one of the top defensive lineman in college football.”

Continued Wistrom, “Winning the Lombardi is beyond my wildest dreams. I’m proud of myself for winning the award because I know how hard I’ve worked. It’s my greatest individual athletic accomplishment at this point in my career.”

In addition to Coach Osborne attending the Lombardi presentation, Grant’s parents, Ron and Kathy Wistrom, were in attendance. Said Wistrom, “To have my parents and Coach Osborne—three of the most important people in my life—present, well, it made the entire evening extremely special and one that I won’t soon forget.” After the banquet, Wistrom called his brothers, a high school coach, and Jason Peter to share his good news. “Everyone had already heard the news, and obviously, they were all ecstatic for me,” said Wistrom. Peter was already in Orlando, Florida, in preparation for Thursday evening’s ESPN’s College Football Awards Show.

Like Wistrom, Peter was also told individually of Coach Osborne’s retirement prior to the official announcement. Popular football players like Jason Peter get many unexpected phone calls at

home. On Tuesday night, December 9, Coach Tom Osborne phoned Peter requesting that he stop by the football office on Wednesday morning prior to leaving for Orlando and the College Football Awards Show. "I came on Wednesday morning and briefly met with Coach Osborne. He told me that the Orange Bowl would be his last game and that he would then be stepping down and handing the reigns over to Coach Solich." Peter's immediate reaction was, "At first, I thought maybe he was joking with me, but then I began to notice his voice was trembling and he was getting somewhat choked up on his words. At that point, I knew it was for real. I guess I was initially in a state of shock."

In fact, Peter was in such a state of shock that, as he was leaving Coach Osborne's office and starting his journey to Orlando, he began searching for answers. "I started to think that maybe it had something to do with us as players or that the actions of a few players over the past few years have just plain worn the guy out and taken the fun away from the game," thought Peter. "I finally realized that it wasn't us. His personal health was of concern, and more importantly, he wanted to make sure the program would be in the right hands maintaining Nebraska's continuity. I believe it would have been difficult for Coach Osborne, the players, and the fans to see an outsider come in and possibly make some drastic changes," shared Peter.

On Thursday, December 11, Lombardi winner Grant Wistrom would have plenty of catching up to do with best friend and Outland Trophy finalist Jason Peter as they crossed paths in Orlando, Florida, for the annual Home Depot College Football Awards Show broadcast on ESPN. "It was neat to catch up with Jason and we definitely had a fun time in Orlando," said Wistrom. Wistrom would be honored for being a member of the Coaches All-American team.

Added Peter, "We had lots of fun on the trip. The atmosphere was great and it was neat to get to know some guys from other teams across the country." In fact, Peter and Wistrom had the chance to go out one night with star Tennessee quarterback Peyton Manning. Said Peter, "This guy is as nice as advertised. He's really a good kid who has a ton of visibility."

Continued Peter, "I felt bad for Peyton seeing what he had to deal with when out in the public. He simply got mobbed everywhere we went and would probably be considered the equal of a Dan Marino or John Elway type in terms of popularity and being noticed. Let me clarify some things. I don't want people to think I'm getting emotional and sympathetic toward Mr. Manning. Believe me, I planed to do my mobbing of Peyton on January 2 during the Orange Bowl game."

Before Peter would chase Manning at the Orange Bowl, he hoped to pick up some hardware at the College Football Awards Show. Chances were outstanding that a Nebraska player would pick up the school's eighth Outland Trophy as both Peter and All-American left guard Aaron Taylor were finalists, along with Alan Faneca of Louisiana State University. Recalled Peter when waiting for the announcement of the Outland Trophy, "I was definitely nervous but actually fairly confident that I would win the award. I was actually starting to prepare and rehearse what my acceptance speech might be like in the event I won the honor. I don't think I was the only person in the audience expecting to hear my name announced as the Outland winner as many so-called experts considered me a front-runner."

Needless to say, the announcement was shocking to Peter. "I was disappointed, yet at the same time happy for Aaron Taylor and the Nebraska program. Aaron is very deserving of the Outland. The only other consolation in me not winning the honor is the fact that I can look myself in the mirror and honestly say I gave it my all through spring ball, summer conditioning, and the entire season and didn't leave any effort unspent," said the emotional All-American. In fact, Peter promises not to dwell upon the fact that he didn't win one of the top individual football awards of 1997. "I will use the experience as a motivational tool and simply make sure that I work even harder in everything that I do, especially leading up to the upcoming National Football League Draft," remarked Peter.

Classroom Honors, Tom Osborne Reflections, and an Orange Bowl Preview

As fate would have it, Peter wouldn't have to wait long to earn, arguably, the greatest accomplishment of his young life. Just nine days later, on December 20, Jason Peter would earn his college diploma from the University of Nebraska with a degree in communication studies. Upon learning that he would indeed graduate, Peter said, "I was tremendously relieved and proud. It felt good to be done with my degree and I was very happy. The majority of people, when I came here, didn't think I would graduate and would probably only achieve success on the gridiron. So it felt good to prove some people wrong and graduate from college before playing my final game."

Similar to the excitement of game day, Peter remembers waking up on graduation morning, December 20, with a great sense of anticipation and excitement. "It seemed like Christmas morning when you're excited to get out of bed and open gifts. I was excited to get up, attend graduation, and get the gift that will keep on giving for a lifetime, my college degree," expressed Peter. Peter was especially pleased that his mother, Mary, was able to come in from New Jersey to share in the special achievement. "Everyone is very happy for me, especially my mom. Graduation has always been much more important to my mom than the success of my football career."

With degree in hand and a chance for yet another national championship ring, Peter is thrilled about what might be in his future. "Once the Orange Bowl is over, I'll be able to get fully

prepared for the NFL Draft. I expect to be a professional football player by trade, yet I understand that I can't play ball forever and at some point will need to put my degree to work."

Wistrom, who earlier in the week was named Coach Tom Osborne's ninth and the school's 13th NCAA Today's Top Eight Award honoree, was very proud of Peter taking care of business in the classroom. "Let's face it, many people categorize and recognize us primarily as great football players and not college students. Jason proved to himself and others that he is much more than just a great athlete. All I can say is, I have great respect for Jason's work ethic and determination," concluded Wistrom.

In fact, Wistrom who has only been on campus for 3 ½ years, since he opted not to redshirt, draws inspiration from Peter's graduation. "Like Jason, I want to be a finisher. I started college and I want to finish college," remarked Wistrom. "I will graduate from college and I do feel the pressure to make sure and get my degree. Big deal, so you have lots of money, but what if you have no skills. You need education and skills to manage money and manage life. Graduation is something I will achieve for myself and for my family. There is no doubt that I will graduate from college."

With the fall term at the University of Nebraska ending on December 19 and college graduation on December 20, Peter, Wistrom, and company were now looking forward to doing some "volunteer" work against the University of Tennessee in the Federal Express Orange Bowl on January 2. According to Wistrom, preparations for Coach Tom Osborne's final game as the head coach of Nebraska football had been progressing well. "The attitude of the guys had been very good. Since the Big 12 game and having nearly a month to prepare, there was no need to beat yourself up with demanding two-plus hour practices. We had some excellent short and crisp practices."

Peter, still bothered by a sore back, practiced only on December 23, the team's final Lincoln practice before departing for Miami on Christmas Eve morning. Said Peter, "I went about three-fourths speed and held up pretty well. I had pretty much been limited to the

meeting rooms and watching film. Trust me, I was going to be ready to play on January 2 and I was sure the Huskers would play a great football game."

Even though the Blackshirts would be battling the highly-touted Peyton Manning, Peter and Wistrom were confident the Husker defense had a good game plan to shut down the Volunteers. "Peyton Manning was a major concern but they also had a very good running game featuring a talented freshman tailback by the name of Jamal Lewis," continued Wistrom. "The first thing we had to do was shut down the run and then just get after Manning in a relentless way. I truly believed we could control the ballgame."

Peter echoes Wistrom's confidence. "I believed Tennessee's offensive line was vulnerable and our front four alone could get good pressure on Manning to help our secondary," said Peter. He also believed that Scott Frost and company would fare well against the Volunteer defense. "You can't learn to stop the option in three to four weeks. Usually teams that defend the option well run it well themselves and go up against it every day in practice all season long. I didn't think Tennessee was big enough up front to play with us for a full four quarters," said Peter.

As team captains, Peter and Wistrom typically began thinking well in advance how their pregame locker room motivational talk would take shape. Both believed that few words would be needed the evening of January 2. Said Peter, "I didn't think the guys were going to need a great talk to be ready for the Orange Bowl. They already seemed to be very focused and determined."

Wistrom concurs, "This was a national championship game. If guys needed a rah-rah, super intense talk to get ready for the Orange Bowl, then something was drastically wrong. We reminded the guys of some important and obvious factors and I think everyone knew what I was talking about," stressed Wistrom.

Some have said that the 1997 Huskers carried a great burden to make certain they usher Coach Tom Osborne out in style with an Orange Bowl victory and possible national championship. "The only outcome we've talked about is winning the game. I was very

confident that we would go out and play 'lights out' football for four quarters and let the chips fall where they may," said Peter.

Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom have much to be thankful about concerning their successful Husker football careers. Both have earned consensus All-America honors, both have enjoyed success in the classroom, and both are regarded by many as two of the best, pure team leaders in recent memory.

Both agree, without any hesitation, that the best part of the Nebraska experience has been the chance to play for Coach Tom Osborne. "You really can't say enough about Coach Osborne. He's been my father in the football program. I have grown a great deal as a person under his nurturing and watchful eye. Next to my father, Tom Osborne is the man I respect the most," shared Wistrom.

"Coach Osborne is one of the most morally upstanding people I will ever know and you just want to play hard for the man because you know he loves you. Coach has yelled at me when I've needed direction and he's been there to congratulate me when I've done well. The state of Nebraska is losing somebody they will always be proud of and can look up to. I just feel fortunate to have played here for four seasons and be a captain on his last team. I would like nothing better than to send him out with a national championship. Simply put Coach Tom Osborne is a legend, and when a legend steps down, you take notice and pay your respects," concluded Wistrom.

Peter is proud and quick to praise what Coach Tom Osborne has meant to him individually and his entire family. "It's been an absolute honor and privilege to play for the man. You want to try and model yourself after him. He handles everything well from success to adversity. I truly respect the way Coach Osborne treats people. It doesn't matter if you are a first-team guy or a fifth-team guy, he treats everyone the same." said Peter.

"I also want to thank Coach Osborne for everything he has done for me and the Peter family, especially with Damian and Christian. Let's face it, Coach Osborne didn't have to go out on a limb and show care and concern for Damian. If Coach Osborne can help and

it's within the rules, he's going to do it. Coach is also all about loyalty. He stands by his coaches, players, and the program. I need to look no farther than my brother Christian. Coach showed tremendous support and understanding for Christian during his struggles. My entire family and I are so thankful for everything he has done for us," summarized Peter.

Perhaps one of the players best qualified to comment about the Huskers' new head man, Frank Solich, is Jason Peter. "Coach Solich is definitely the right man to lead the program. He brings everything to the table that Coach Osborne did, such as high morals, values, work ethic, and fairness. His personality might be somewhat different, but I'm sure he won't make any drastic changes and alter what has been working for Coach Osborne. Coach Solich knows what has to be done to keep the program rolling and he's going to do everything possible to make sure Nebraska remains on top of the college football world," said Peter.

Whereas players like Jason and Grant were fortunate to play their entire career under Dr. Tom Osborne, some, including Grant's younger brother, Tracey, never had the opportunity to suit up and truly play under a living legend. Remembered Grant, "I think many of the younger guys were really upset about Coach Osborne's retirement. They have to understand that life goes on and they are going to be part of a new tradition under Head Coach Frank Solich. Honestly, I don't see much change in the Nebraska program. Nebraska is still going to be Nebraska and win at least 9 or 10 games every season. They will be in the hunt for a Big 12 championship every year, and some years, they will contend for the No. 1 ranking," explained Wistrom.

Before Husker players and fans look forward to the Coach Solich era, it's important to hear the details of Tom Osborne's final game, the 1998 FedEx Orange Bowl.

Orange Bowl Preparations and Lifelong Memories

Leaving home for Christmas is nothing new for Coach Tom Osborne, his staff, and players. Something exciting was in the air as the Huskers were preparing to leave Lincoln for Miami, Florida, on December 24, 1997. After a grueling summer conditioning program, four months of demanding practices, and 12 victories, the Huskers found themselves in a familiar situation. The 1997 Huskers would have the honor of playing in a game that would have true national championship implications.

In retrospect, the 1996 season was the first and only one in four years in which this team was unable to earn a spot in a national title game. They settled for an alliance bowl berth and victory in the 1996 Orange Bowl. Prior to the 1996 season, Tom Osborne's Huskers appeared in three consecutive national championship games. The Huskers earned championship titles in 1994 and 1995, but had a narrow miss in 1993. Now, facing the last game of their careers, Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom were two Huskers determined to make sure Nebraska had a shot at winning all the marbles this season. Some memorable moments were certainly created as the 1997 Huskers began to prepare for the matchup against third-ranked Tennessee in the 1998 FedEx Orange Bowl.

"Last year we came down to Miami and, for the most part, played the game in a pressure-free environment. We weren't playing for No. 1, rather playing to restore respect and confidence in the Nebraska program after losing two games," remembered Peter.

"This year we come to Miami with a 12-0 record and everybody is talking about Nebraska and Michigan. There were so many subplots, but the bottom line was we knew we would have to win impressively for two reasons. The first was, we needed to gain ground on Michigan and make a long-lasting final impression in hopes of getting all or a piece of the title. Secondly, we want to send Coach Osborne out a winner—and not just with a ho-hum win. It would have to be impressive and dominating."

Wistrom added, "The team worked so hard to make sure we would return to Miami one year later playing for No. 1. The team knew what was at stake and I could sense a very business-like approach to this bowl trip by most of the players. Throw out 13-0 and a possible national championship, of paramount importance is to make sure we send Coach Osborne out as a winner. Our team saw this as a privilege and opportunity to play well on behalf of Coach Osborne's first 24 teams."

Remembered Wistrom, "Things were much more stressful during practice and the coaching staff was very intense. There was a sense of urgency present at all times during practice and a desire for perfect execution, and that was maybe lacking some during last year's bowl practices."

Peter was in full agreement concerning the importance of good practices while in Miami. "The deciding factor whether we would reach our dream of No. 1, and now sending Coach Osborne out in style, would be the way we practiced. Grant and I talked about making an effort to keep everything intense, crisp, and physical from start to finish at every practice. As two of the captains, we decided we would not tolerate any messing or joking around at any point throughout any of our practices. Our message to the team was simple, 'When you wake up, it's time to go to work. The Orange Bowl wasn't a vacation for a job well done. There was still plenty of work to be done, and our rest and fun would begin on January 3 and not a day before then,'" explained Peter.

Whereas matters were intense at the St. Thomas University practice fields, the Huskers, and especially Jason Peter and Grant

Wistrom, took a low-key approach concerning their social plans while in Miami. "Fortunately, Jason and I both matured enough not to get any body parts pierced like we did last year," shared Wistrom. "Jason and I went out the first three nights of our trip and that was it. As soon as we got back from practice, we didn't set foot on the beach. We knew that we had lots of things to take care of and didn't want to leave Miami with any regrets."

It was also important for Wistrom and Peter to send the right message to their teammates regarding priorities and focus. "Most of the other players see the actions of Jason and me. If they see we have a business-like serious approach, then, for the most part, they model our actions. If we are out on the town pushing curfew every night, well then it sends the wrong message to the younger players and it shows a great deal of disrespect for everything that the 1998 Orange Bowl would come to stand for," concluded Wistrom.

Much like practices were more intense in preparation for the 1998 FedEx Orange Bowl, Peter and Wistrom would find some direct and difficult questions from the national media, something that was lacking in the previous Orange Bowl. According to Wistrom, the media was most inquisitive about the impact that Osborne's retirement and Manning's right knee injury would have on the outcome of the game.

"My responses were consistent and obvious. I felt honored to be a part of Coach Osborne's last team and we want very much to send him out with a big victory. It would be great to cap it all off with a national championship. Regarding Manning's knee, my reply was that we wished him a speedy recovery, because for us to have a shot at the title, we needed to beat Tennessee with Manning at the helm," summarized Wistrom.

Peter admits to being somewhat caught off guard with the flurry of questions dealing with his brother and former Husker team captain, Christian Peter, who is now a member of the New York Giants. "Those questions shocked me, mainly because that was a subject not addressed for well over a year. For some reason it seemed like the national media and even Nebraska media were

determined to bring up the past problems and get my final reaction. I was determined to turn the media's quest for a negative story into a positive one by responding carefully and with respect," explained Peter. "It was definitely tough responding to such targeted and manipulative questions. I had to be guarded yet, at the same time, wanted to get my point across about the pressures of being a high-profile player like Grant and me. And with respect to the questions about Christian, I'm always going to stand up for my brother because I understand him and he has done so much for me."

Wistrom also credits the older Peter with many positive impressions still lingering among the intangibles of the 1997 team. "Guys like Christian Peter and Terry Connealy are very much a part of the 1997 team and will play a role in our bid for the title. Those guys passed along work ethic, intensity, and attitude," said Wistrom.

Added the younger Peter, "We have modeled that intensity throughout our entire careers and I know the younger guys have picked up on it and will continue that type of leadership next season and beyond. Guys like Mike Brown, Jay Foreman and Chad Kelsay, to name a few, are well prepared to keep things rolling."

Peter summarized, "My message to the reporters was that nobody is perfect and people are going to make mistakes. Still everyone has positive qualities and the one glaring thing about Christian that won't receive much attention, yet will be a decisive factor in the outcome on January 2, is his tireless work ethic."

Two issues of great concern were the health of star players Jason Peter and Tennessee quarterback Peyton Manning. "My back, for the most part, held up fine," said Peter. "As the game got closer, my back was giving me some minor problems. I think I might of got overstretched at one point causing some aggravation. I can promise that my back will be a non-issue during the game. When you are in that type of game atmosphere with the ultimate goal of leaving it all out on the field for Tom Osborne, I will play through any pain that might develop."

Concerning fellow consensus All-American Manning, both Peter and Wistrom knew a healthy Manning would go a long way

in determining the Huskers' bid for a third national championship in four seasons. "We were hoping Tennessee had enough national respect, that if we beat them convincingly, we could leapfrog Michigan in one poll. We knew that wouldn't happen if we beat a Tennessee team without Manning engineering their offense," explained Wistrom.

"Fortunately, as game day was approaching, Manning was improving and the media perceptions were that he was at or near 100 percent which certainly helped our cause," lobbied Peter.

Critical to the Huskers' national championship hopes would be the outcome of the 1998 Rose Bowl between top-ranked Michigan and eighth-ranked Washington State on New Year's Day. The Huskers would gather to watch the Rose Bowl in the Nebraska locker room at Pro Player Stadium, only leaving the television during halftime to participate in the traditional pregame walk-through.

Said Wistrom, "For us to have a shot at being outright national champions, we knew Michigan would have to lose the game. As the game was progressing and we saw Washington State hanging close, some of us realized that we would still have a chance at the top ranking, at least in one poll."

Unlike the miracle in Missouri, there would be no last-minute heroics in Pasadena as Ryan Leaf and the Washington State Cougars ran out of time giving Michigan a narrow 21-16 victory, 12-0 season, and legitimate claim to the 1997 National Championship. "It was a somber Nebraska team leaving the stadium on New Year's night, yet I could sense a glimmer of hope," stated Peter. That glimmer of hope existed, in large part, due to a brief team meeting led by Coach Osborne in the Nebraska locker room immediately following the Michigan Rose Bowl victory.

"Coach Osborne said with Michigan only winning by five points, the door is open, not just cracked, but definitely wide open for us to earn a national championship. Coach stressed that we would need to put up some points offensively and shut Tennessee's explosive offense down," summarized Peter.

Wistrom had this reaction to Osborne's attempt of instilling total confidence in his players. "The man has proved his wisdom and that he is a prophet. How can anyone forget his memorable halftime talk at the 1995 Orange Bowl when we came back to beat Miami to win the 1994 national title? Coach Osborne is so convincing and speaks with such determination, it creates a powerful belief system that seemingly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Another meeting that hit home with Wistrom and Peter was the one Osborne called for the Husker seniors which took place after the walk-through. "Coach Osborne basically thanked us for everything and told us that we have done all that he has ever asked of us. Coach credited everyone for sticking with the program for four-to-five years and for making a special contribution," said Wistrom.

Continued Peter, "Coach talked about how some of us were All-Americans and others have never got off the scout team, yet there was something unique that he valued about each senior player." Peter agreed with Osborne in that he also has tremendous respect for the players who rarely take the field during a game. "It's easy to go out every week and be a starter. It's not easy to go out week after week and get beat up by the starters while still maintaining the same enthusiasm and intensity week in and week out their entire career," explained Peter.

With the first day of 1998 in the books, the Huskers were more than ready for the "Battle by the Beach," and an opportunity for Nebraska's third national crown in an amazing four-year span. Game day, January 2, 1998, had finally arrived. Roommates on the road, Peter and Wistrom never have a problem sleeping well the night before a big game and woke up eager for the Orange Bowl. "The guys were definitely at the point where we wanted to play the game. After spending nine nights in a hotel and watching everybody else play their bowl games, our game couldn't get here soon enough," said Peter.

Added Wistrom, "We wanted to play some football and we

knew that we were well prepared and ready to make a statement to the nation.”

Game day is often synonymous with fan pandemonium at the team hotel and countless distractions. “I love the Nebraska fans and appreciate their loyalty, but the last thing I want to do on the day of a game is sign autographs, pose for pictures with people wearing corncobs, and talk about how bad we are going to win the game. It definitely takes away your focus and intensity,” shared Wistrom.

Orange Bowl game day was no different than any other road game, according to Peter. “We got up, ate breakfast, went to chapel or Mass, had lunch, attended meetings, got taped, and then had some time to gather our thoughts in our room.” Before heading off to the stadium, the traditional “psyche-up” tape was shown to the team. There were several goals in the tape according to team captain Peter. “We wanted to remind the players what was at stake and build up their confidence. Some of the guys on the tape included all of the captains and others like Matt Hoskinson and Ahman Green.”

Wistrom had several recollections of the tape. “Hoskinson challenged the team to leave it all on the field and have no regrets, then Vershan broke down the team position-by-position detailing our team talent. Aaron Taylor focused on the dominance of the offensive line, while Jason reminded the guys that Tennessee isn’t close to the same level of the tradition-rich Nebraska program. I told the guys that they would wear the red and white with a tremendous amount of pride in the ’98 Orange Bowl. We were about to do battle, not only for our team, but also for all the guys who came before us and will play after us. We must play with pride and have no fear,” shouted Wistrom.

Upon arriving at Pro Player Stadium for the Orange Bowl game, Wistrom and Peter quickly gathered that the atmosphere was close to electric and certainly a significant improvement over the 1996 Orange Bowl game which drew barely over 50,000 fans. “It was very discouraging last year playing in front of such a dismal crowd. This year, you could tell from the minute we arrived at the stadium that the fans would be intense and this game would have a special feel to it,” said Wistrom.

Peter added, "The game should have been sold out and tickets should have been in demand because, in our minds, this was truly a national championship game on every level."

The Husker All-Americans were also pleased that so many family and friends were able to attend their final collegiate game. Supporting Jason in person included his parents, sister, and other relatives from Germany, Virginia, and North Carolina. The only noticeable absence was brother and mentor, Christian. "I wish he could have been there and I know he made every attempt. I knew he would be watching guys like Grant and me with lots of pride and emotion," said Jason. Grant's parents, brothers Chance and Tracey (Nebraska freshman), and other family and friends from Orlando and Webb City were able to witness Grant's last stand as a Husker.

After pregame stretching and warmups, the time had come for Coach Tom Osborne's final pregame locker room talk. Said Wistrom, "From the time he announced his retirement on December 10 to his final pregame talk, not once did he give us a 'win one for the Gipper' message. He focused on the task at hand and how we were still in a position to reach our team goals."

Although Osborne didn't use the "win one for the Gipper" rally cry, it was used by other Husker coaches. "Coach McBride used the fact that this was Coach Osborne's last game as a motivational strategy on more than one occasion. Coach McBride is a tremendous motivator; but as I've said before, I think very little had to be said before we took the field, considering everything at stake," summarized Peter.

Still, Peter and Wistrom would try to inspire and motivate the Husker team one last time with their final players-only pregame message. Wistrom had a strong message to the team. "The man outside the locker room door has given 25 years of his life and his family's life to the program. If we can't give 60 minutes of all-out effort tonight, then something is wrong with all of us."

Peter's message was equally powerful. "Let's just forget about the Rose Bowl and concentrate on the task at hand. Tennessee was trash talking that Nebraska is not a physical team. I know the offense

will pound the ball at them all night and eventually break them down. Defensively, I know Tennessee hasn't played a team with our kind of speed. I ended with the fact that the seniors have never lost a game wearing red jerseys and that it was important to keep that record intact while making sure we sent Coach Osborne out with an impressive win that he will never forget!"

As the Husker captains broke from the locker room ready to take the walk leading them to the Volunteers and the coin toss, all emotions were on hold. "The month of December was full of so many defining moments and I found myself trying to savor every last aspect of the Orange Bowl trip. I knew everything was for the absolute last time as a Husker, yet I tried to keep my emotion under control much like Coach Osborne has done his entire career," recalled Peter.

Said Wistrom, "It was finally time to get down to business and hopefully make a statement to the college football world."

Fitting Farewell “The Game”

The Husker Blackshirts wouldn't have to wait long to make their opening statement to the nation and to the Tennessee Volunteers. "They won the toss and elected to take the ball, thus challenging the manhood of our defense from the very beginning. The defense takes that as a sign of disrespect when a team wants to put their offense on the field right away. They are saying that they are confident they will be able to move the ball against us, and that flat out angers us," summarized Peter.

Wistrom knew the first series would go a long way in determining the outcome of the game. "When you are facing the best quarterback in the country and maybe one of the best offenses in the nation, it's important that you go out and set the tone. We went out and played well that first series, and regardless of what happened from that point on, they knew we were for real," stressed Wistrom.

For the most part, the defense played well during the entire game, however, the Blackshirts certainly carried the load in the first half and made some key plays to help jump start the offense. "The offense struggled at times during the first half and the defense knew we had to keep hanging in there and get the ball back for the offense," stressed Peter. Blackshirts Ralph Brown, Mike Rucker, and Eric Warfield made big plays in the first half, literally putting the ball back into the hands of Scott Frost and the Husker offense. Ahman Green and Shevin Wiggins would run for Husker touchdowns in the

first and second quarters, respectively, while the Blackshirts limited Manning and the Volunteers to just three points by the end of the first half.

"Their game plan centered around quick passes because they felt Peyton wouldn't have lots of time to set up for the long ball. He threw quick passes to avoid the sack and we were able to contain Tennessee for the most part," said Peter. In fact, by game's end, the Heisman favorite and runner-up would end up with 21 of 31 completions for a mere 134 yards with one interception and one touchdown.

Pleased to take a 14-3 lead into the locker room, both players and coaches were well aware that an inspiring second-half performance was their only hope for a national championship. Remembered Wistrom, "Coach Osborne told us we were playing well but we needed to put an exclamation point on the game. If we wanted to win a national title, we would have to take our game to the next level. We all knew that 14-3 wouldn't be enough to get us the title. Coach Osborne reaffirmed what the players were well aware of. We needed to have a great second half to have any hopes of becoming No. 1."

Essential to the Huskers' hopes of laying claim to all or a piece of the national title would be the emergence of the traditionally strong Husker ground attack. Said Peter, "Our coaches and offense knew they had Tennessee on the ropes and their defense was beginning to fatigue. It was just a matter of beating them down. Everything started to work in the third quarter. Physically, Tennessee simply couldn't handle our offense and we were running up and down the field."

Nebraska was, literally, running up and down the field the entire third quarter. On the opening possession of the second half, the Huskers engineered a time-consuming 80-yard drive in 12 plays, which was capped off with a 1-yard touchdown run by Scott Frost. The "Big Red" machine wasn't to be denied on their next series. This time they covered 73 yards in only six snaps with Frost going in for the score from 11 yards out. With not even 10 minutes gone in the

third quarter, Nebraska had bolted to an impressive 28-3 lead. Players started to realize, much like Osborne had previously emphasized, that the door to a title was wide open and a national championship was very realistic. "You could start to feel a sense of urgency among the players that maybe we could send Coach Osborne out in grand style with a national championship," said Wistrom.

Added Peter, "As the game was winding down, I felt we needed more points and couldn't give Tennessee much, if anything." With 1:58 left in the third quarter, Manning connected on a 5-yard scoring pass to Peerless Price. After a failed 2-point conversion, the Huskers still had a convincing 28-9 lead, but were looking for more.

Remembered Wistrom, "I thought the final two minutes of the third quarter would determine the outcome of the game. I was hoping we answered Tennessee's score because we were very aware that Peyton and his receivers could strike in a hurry and, all of a sudden we would be fighting to hang on." Wistrom's hopes were answered thanks in large part to junior sensation Ahman Green, who would total 69 of Nebraska's next 80-yard scoring drive, giving Nebraska a much more comfortable 35-9 lead with one quarter remaining.

Nebraska and Scott Frost would manage yet another touchdown with slightly over four minutes remaining in the game, making the score 42-9. However, the Blackshirts were looking for one final impression. "We wanted to stop Tennessee and give the offense one more shot at a final score," said Wistrom.

Wistrom and Peter played the majority of the final series before being pulled when Tennessee, led by backup quarterback Tee Martin, crossed into Nebraska territory. "Coach McBride felt it was important to let the other seniors get in the game and I couldn't have agreed more," said Peter. With just 58 seconds left, Martin tossed a 3-yard touchdown pass and also connected on the 2-point conversion, which made the eventual final score: Nebraska 42, and Tennessee 17.

Explained Peter, "It was upsetting to see Tennessee get that final

score. I was kind of worried that those eight points could be just the thing that would cost us a few votes and maybe keep us from getting part or all of the title." Despite being concerned whether or not the polls would consider Nebraska's victory impressive enough for all or a share of the top spot, Peter gathered himself and recruited Wistrom's help for one final splash.

"With about 45 seconds left in the game, Grant and I grabbed the water bucket and strategically positioned ourselves in a blind spot where Coach couldn't sense it coming. We executed the splash to perfection and I think it was fitting that Grant and I did the honors," said Peter.

Added Wistrom, "Nobody told us to do it. Jason and I just took it upon ourselves to be the guys. This has always been Coach Osborne's team, but Jason and I certainly feel like we have been loyal leaders, and in many respects, represented the heartbeat of the team and the fans. With that in mind, we just did it and then we both gave him a big hug and offered our congratulations."

For just a brief moment after Osborne was splashed, emotions took over Wistrom. "From just over one year ago, Jason and I were two of the guys who kind of plowed through everything and made certain this team had a chance to come full circle and take back the title we let slip away. I think many of the players would tell you that Jason and I were two of the guys who kind of ramrodded the whole effort on the ground level. We supported the guys when needed, yelled at them a lot, and took the heat when it had to be taken. The Nebraska team had done all we could; and, although thrilled about the big win, I found myself nervous and anxious knowing our chances for a share of the title rested in the hands of others," concluded Wistrom.

Actually, there still remained some unfinished business for Tom Osborne and the Huskers. The Huskers had to collect some hardware and lobby for the top spot in college football. "It was nice to be up on the awards platform in front of all the loyal Nebraska fans. It was very emotional hearing the chants of OSBORNE, OSBORNE and T-O, T-O. To me, it was a defining moment in college football history. At that very moment, I truly felt like we

were the best team in the country and justice wouldn't be served without a national championship," summarized Peter.

Wistrom had mixed feelings about the trophy presentations. "I almost got knocked off the stage 10 times because there was so much commotion, and I didn't get lots of camera time. Seriously, it was neat to be up there with the Orange Bowl Trophy, the Alliance Trophy, and above all, the best coach in the country in Tom Osborne."

After plenty of interviews, including one with former Husker Trev Alberts of CNNSI, about the debate for No. 1, Wistrom and Peter headed into a Husker locker room for the final time. First up were brief visits with Coach Osborne. "I tried to sum up my feelings to the man by saying thanks for everything, but that really didn't scratch the surface, considering all that he has done for me. He's done more for me than I could sum up in 100 pages. I could give story after story and example after example about Coach Osborne's commitment to me as a total person. I will forever be in his debt," explained Wistrom.

Peter also thanked Osborne in the locker room. "I told him how much he will always mean to me and congratulated him on the victory. He thanked me, which I was hesitant to accept because he is the man who has done so much for me and countless other people," remarked Peter.

Peter and Wistrom also made a special effort in giving final farewells to their "difference-makers" during their storied Nebraska careers. Recalled Wistrom, "I knew this would be my last time around the team. I wanted to search out coaches and players who have been helpful to me and who have meant so much to me over the years. Of course, I gave Jason lots of love and told him how much he meant to me."

Mission Accomplished Huskers are No. 1

It was now in the early morning hours of January 3, 1998. The Huskers made it back to team headquarters at the Sheraton Bal Harbour, and after hearing Michigan was crowned national champions in the AP Poll by a convincing 33-point margin, the Huskers would have to wait well over an hour before hearing the final USA Today/ESPN Coaches Poll. It was during that wait that Peter and Wistrom had already started to reflect on their brilliant and memorable Nebraska experiences.

Said Peter, "Nebraska football has taught me important messages in life. During the past couple of years, Coach Osborne has had some ups and downs to deal with in the program. Coach plowed through the adversity and leaves the program on top of his profession. That is life in a nutshell. Things aren't always going to go smoothly and you will have to fight through some struggles. If you hold on to your values and work ethic, good things are sure to come."

Tom Osborne has helped me more than I will probably ever realize. Through watching him, I've learned how to present myself, be diplomatic, and have a good sense of humor. I see Coach Osborne as the perfect individual as far as being a complete person who stands for all the right things. Yes, he's a great football coach, probably the best that's ever lived. More important is the way he handles himself off the field. He has earned all of my admiration," exclaimed the emotional Peter.

Wistrom echoed Peter's heartfelt sentiments. "Coach Osborne teaches you how to treat people. The way the man treats everybody with the same level of respect and dignity is amazing. I will try to model his consistent demeanor and fairness throughout my lifetime," said Wistrom. While painstakingly awaiting the final coaches' poll, Wistrom was in the reflection mode. "First and foremost, I'd like to thank Coach Osborne, Coach McBride, and not to be forgotten, Tony Samuel. I'd also like to credit my high school coach, Jesse Wall. Coach Wall and Coach Samuel had everything to do with me winning the Lombardi. Beyond that, I will never forget the Colorado game during my junior year and, of course, the national championships. I am also proud to be a two-time GTE Academic All-American and NCAA Today's Top Eight Award winner. Finally, I will forever cherish the relationships and friendships I've made while at Nebraska."

Peter offered similar reflections of his Nebraska tenure. "Besides thanking Coach Osborne one final time, I owe a great deal of appreciation to Coach McBride. He has had a tremendous impact on me personally. Coach McBride helped shape me into the person and player I am today. He's a guy who doesn't stand for second place and commands complete effort. In addition to all of the rings, my career highlight was college graduation. All in all, it was an unbelievable ride and I will never forget the Husker experience and I'm so proud I wore the red and white of Nebraska!"

With reflections put to rest, the two All-Americans were ready to retire and headed back to their hotel room. Shortly before 3:00 a.m. EST, the two were praying for one final memory to cherish. "ESPN's Chris Fowler came on the TV screen and indicated that Nebraska was No. 1 in the coaches poll, and we just went nuts," said Wistrom.

"We screamed, cheered, and cried in a matter of seconds. The emotion of finally making good on a goal, a promise to ourselves and the entire state was unbelievable," explained Peter.

Receiving 1,520 points and 32 first-place votes, compared to 1,516 points and 30 first-place votes for Michigan, gave the Huskers

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the national championship in the final 1997 USA Today/ESPN Poll. Said Wistrom, "I felt completely satisfied. Going out as national champions is why Jason and I came back for our senior years. We said no to the riches of the NFL because we wanted to go out on top. We came back because we knew the 1997 team had the potential to do it. It just took some effort and great leadership. Guys like Frost, Vershan, Taylor, Zatechka, Hoskinson, and others all matured into good leaders throughout the year and the younger guys really stepped up as the season went along."

"We did it! Thirteen victories and 367 days later, the Huskers and Tom Osborne were once again on top of the college football world. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!" concluded Peter.

(Continued from front flap)

Zimmer is an honorary member of the Golden Key National Honor Society and in 1996 received the Chancellor's Award for Exemplary Service to University of Nebraska - Lincoln students.

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WISTROM *heart & soul* PETER

College football coaches, players, fans and media alike regard Nebraska football defensive stars Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom as two of the most determined and talented players nationwide. All-American's Peter and Wistrom shared their dream of returning Nebraska football to perfection and the national championship in 1997. They also share perspectives on off-the-field issues ranging from "community caution" to "role model" expectations. Best friends, roommates and teammates, Wistrom and Peter openly talk about lessons learned during their highly decorated Husker careers. Lessons of loyalty, leadership, dedication, respect, and work ethic will inspire even the non-football fan. Considered by many as the "*heart and soul*" of the 1997 Husker team, Peter and Wistrom shed tears when talking about legendary Nebraska coach and father figure, Tom Osborne, whom they would learn on December 10, 1997, would step down as Husker head coach. Both also talk of being moved to tears as they close out their Nebraska playing days that produced a remarkable four-year record of 49-2 with three national championships, two Big Eight Conference titles, and Nebraska's first-ever Big XII Championship in 1997.